

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(October 21, 2007)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

### **SERMON SERIES: Well done, good and faithful CHURCH**

(studies in 1 Thessalonians)

## **A Church to Make Jesus Smile**

Study #1

(Background from Acts; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5)

### **Introduction: The church of your dreams...**

Some time ago one of the “churchy” magazines to which I subscribe included an article titled, *“The church of your dreams - and why it’s dangerous to live there.”*

You could substitute “church” for just about anything and the message would work: *“The marriage of your dreams, the job of your dream, the calculus teacher of your dreams, the wardrobe, the car, the house and yard of your dreams - and why it’s dangerous to live there.”*

Fantasizing about the ideal situation can lead to disillusion with the real.

Of course, it’s fun to walk through the homes featured in the annual San Antonio Parade of Homes. But then you have to go home. And that homecoming forces you to wrestle with contentment over your very REAL house with old carpet, peeling paint, dirty bathrooms and green Formica countertops.

For married people, playing mind games with what the perfect marriage would look like can be dangerous because God hasn’t called anyone to the perfect marriage. Those who are married are called to REAL marriage - which in every case consists of two sinners living together.

So also, in the ideal church everyone loves everyone else, everyone has fun, and everyone follows the rules. But, Northwest Community Church is an ACTUAL church. Here, sin happens. We stumble and fall and then love well. We serve each other and then next day don’t get along.

This and every other church - regardless of the hype - is populated by people in recovery, and is therefore far from perfect.

HOWEVER, while we need to abandon the fantasy of church-as-perfect, we’d be just as foolish to aim at anything but fervent worship, genuine love and outrageously effective evangelism.

The Bible tells us what is REAL and at the same time points us toward the goal of the IDEAL.

And, for the next few weeks we’re going to consider together a letter written by the apostle Paul to a church that was heading in the direction we have every intention of going.

This was a first century church located in the Macedonian city of Thessalonica. The letter, 1 Thessalonians, was one of the first letters Paul wrote.<sup>1</sup>

It is because of a desire to see our church make progress - not just each of us individually, but our **CHURCH** - that we’re embarking on a study of Paul’s short-ish first letter to the church at Thessalonica. This morning we are going to see that it was a church that brought a smile to the Apostle Paul’s face - and likely to the face of the Lord Jesus, too.

As we work our way through the first few verses of this remarkable little letter, we’ll begin to see what it was about this church that got Paul so revved up. And when we see that, we’ll discover what kind of a church God would have us become - not in our dreams, but REALLY.

In letters we write today, the opening usually identifies the recipient. Not so in the first century. The letter in those days began with the writer, or in this case, the writers.

---

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps preceded only by Galatians.

## Greetings (v. 1)

**From...**

### *[1] Paul and Silvanus and Timothy*

But this introduction is different from many of the other letters Paul wrote.

Often he referred to himself as “*an apostle*” or as “*a servant of Jesus Christ.*” Here, he is just “*Paul.*”

I like that. He’s still an apostle, of course, but this is a letter written to good friends. There is no formality. He is very personal.

And he is writing with others - Silvanus (or Silas) and Timothy. All three of these men knew the Thessalonians. How did they come to the Thessalonians?

Well, let’s back up a few years prior to the time that this letter was written to see how it was the Paul and Silvanus and Timothy came to have a great relationship with the Christian church in Thessalonica.

### *Commissioned in Antioch*

In the Syrian city of **Antioch**, two hundred and fifty miles north of Jerusalem, a church had been established. This church was having tremendous impact throughout the whole region of Syria - and they wanted to have even greater impact.

So, at a certain point, while they were fasting and praying, the Holy Spirit singled out two men - Barnabas and Saul (who was soon to become known as the Apostle Paul) - to take the Gospel of Jesus from Antioch to Asia Minor.<sup>2</sup>

This they did, preaching the Gospel, leading people to faith in Christ, and participating in miraculous healings.

---

<sup>2</sup> John Mark, Barnabas’ nephew went with them for a while, but turned back when things turned nasty as they entered the territory of Galatia. (Acts 13:13; 15:37-39)

They faced opposition (at one point Paul was the target of a mob’s violence and was stoned to the point where he was presumed dead) and successfully planted churches in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe.

At the end of this trip they returned to Antioch, their sending church, for some much needed R&R.<sup>3</sup>

Soon, Paul and Barnabas were ready to head back out for another missions trip and to take the Gospel to other places where people had never heard.

### *The team shake-up*

A problem arose, though, when Barnabas expressed a desire to take his nephew, John Mark, with them.

Paul was in no mood to take John Mark, since John Mark had abandoned them on the previous journey. The opposition became so intense that Paul and Barnabas split up, and, as far as we know, never worked together again in ministry.<sup>4</sup>

Well, Paul did go out as a missionary again. And with Barnabas heading off with John Mark in one direction, Paul took Silvanus<sup>5</sup> (from the church at Antioch) and Timothy<sup>6</sup> (who lived in Lystra) with him in another on what we refer to as the Second Missionary Journey.

---

<sup>3</sup> Included in this time period between the two missionary journeys was the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15).

<sup>4</sup> We should note, though, that Barnabas spent time with John Mark and that the younger man became solid and a reliable Christian. Paul recognized this late in life, asking that John Mark come to his service while he himself was in prison. (2 Timothy 4:11) And, we know that John Mark wrote one of our four Gospels, Mark.

<sup>5</sup> Silvanus had been one of the men who took the decisions of the Council of Jerusalem to Antioch (Acts 15). He was known as a faithful preacher (2 Corinthians 1:19) and was the Apostle Peter’s helper as he wrote his first letter. (1 Peter 5:12)

<sup>6</sup> We know that Timothy was the son of a Greek father and a converted, Jewish mother. Paul had Timothy circumcised when he took him on this missionary journey. Timothy was well equipped to be involved with Paul in this venture, as he had been instructed in the Scriptures since childhood. It is clear throughout the letter of 1 Thessalonians and elsewhere that Paul thought very highly of Timothy.

## Philippi

On this second journey, the trio began by heading west. Not long into the trip, Paul received a vision of a man from Macedonia, calling to him with, “*Come over to Macedonia and help us.*” (Acts 16:9)

Paul and his companions (Luke was obviously with the three as he wrote), “...*sought to go into Macedonia.*” (Acts 16:10), perceiving that this was the direction that God would have them go.<sup>7</sup>

The first city to which he and his companions traveled was Philippi. In Philippi, people were saved and a church was established. But, the mission concluded there with something like a riot.

Paul and Silvanus were arrested, beaten, and imprisoned. Then, while they were singing hymns of praise to God at midnight, God sent an earthquake that released them from their chains.

The jailer, who was about to commit suicide, thinking that the prisoners had escaped, was converted - and the next morning the authorities in the city begged Paul and Silas to leave.

They did leave, taking Timothy and Luke with them and headed straight for Thessalonica, about one hundred miles from Philippi.<sup>8</sup>

## Thessalonica

Acts chapter 17 tells us something of the team’s ministry in Thessalonica. We understand that they were there for only a short time.

***[Acts 17:2] And according to Paul’s custom, he went to them (i.e. - the Jews), and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, [3] explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.”***

<sup>7</sup> With that decision, the course of Christianity was set for centuries to come as Paul turned his back on Asia Minor and became the first Christian missionary to Europe.

<sup>8</sup> There is no record of them preaching in either Amphipolis or Apollonia, cities they passed though on the way to Thessalonica.

Based on this verse, some have thought that Paul and his friends only stayed in Thessalonica for three weeks. However, there is evidence that he was there longer than three weeks, but probably for a time measurable in weeks or a few short months.<sup>9</sup>

Paul’s ministry in the city didn’t last long here, but it was solid enough to leave behind a thriving church. But, problems soon arose from the devout Jewish community, who reacted to the success of the missionaries with violence.

There was a mob scene that put the whole city in upheaval. One of the new converts, Jason, was dragged from his house along with other members of the church to stand before the authorities. They accused the Christians of treason against Caesar, since they were worshipping another king, Jesus.

In the end, Jason was released when he pledged to not stir up trouble (not that he had stirred up trouble in the first place!).<sup>10</sup>

So, things settled down - and Paul and Silvanus left Thessalonica under cover of night (Acts 17:10 - must not have settled down THAT much!) and traveled to the next town, which happened to be Berea. Trouble was not far behind in Berea...

<sup>9</sup> 1 Thessalonians 2:7-11, which mentions that he labored diligently would indicate that he might have stayed longer. We know that he stayed in Thessalonica long enough to receive two “home missions offerings” from Philippi. (Philippians 4:16) We know that he worked at his tentmaking trade to support himself. (1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:6-15)

<sup>10</sup> ***[Acts 17:5] But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and attacking the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people. [6] When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have upset the world have come here also; [7] and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” [8] They stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things. [9] And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them.***

*From Berea forward!*

The Bereans themselves were nice enough.<sup>11</sup> But Luke tells us that ***[Acts 17:13]...when the Jews of Thessalonica found out that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea also, they came there as well, agitating and stirring up the crowds.***

Thus, for a third time, Paul found himself at the center of a riot! The new converts at Berea realized that his life was in danger and so sent him away, while Silas and Timothy remained behind to deal with damage control.

Paul traveled south along the coast and landed at Athens, where he engaged in a brief ministry which yielded only little fruit, and a large amount of rejection - both of himself and of the message. (Acts 18:10-15)

After his stay in Athens, Paul went by himself<sup>12</sup> to the city of Corinth. Now, in what frame of mind do you think we would have found Paul had we happened upon him in Corinth?

Think about what we know of his most recent experiences.

- He had broken a relational tie with a close friend, Barnabas, prior to embarking on this Second Missionary Journey.
- While he had watched the Lord powerfully at work in the places he visited, he had been physically beaten in Philippi
- He was at the center of riots in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea.
- He had been mocked at Athens.
- And, now, in Corinth, where he had encountered initial rejection, he was all alone.

If you have just experienced all of that, how would you be doing, emotionally?!

---

<sup>11</sup> ***[Acts 17:11] Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so. [12] Therefore many of them believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men.***

<sup>12</sup> Perhaps Luke was with him.

There is every reason to believe that Paul was discouraged when he came to Corinth. In one place, he even tells us that he arrived in Corinth ***“in weakness, fear and trembling.”*** (1 Cor. 2:3)

But, while he was in Corinth, he received news about how one of the churches in Macedonia was doing - the church at Thessalonica. This report, the result of Timothy’s personal experience with the church, prompted Paul to sit down and write a letter, the letter that is before us this morning.<sup>13</sup>

**To...**

***[1]...to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ<sup>14</sup>: Grace to you and peace.***

This letter is not written to an individual in the church (as in Timothy or Titus or Philemon) or to groups of people in the church (as in Elders and Deacons). This is written to the church.

Truly, it is directed to everyone who makes up the church in Thessalonica - the men and the women, the teens, and the children. The rich, the poor, the mature and the immature are all in Paul’s sights as he writes. No one is excluded.

But even more to the point, it is directed to the corporate body of believers, to the church as a whole.

And so, as we read this letter, it is directed to each of us, individually, but even more, to all of us corporately.

---

<sup>13</sup> Acts 18 tells us that Paul spent eighteen months in Corinth, and we understand that he wrote the letter of 1 Thessalonians - actually 2 Thessalonians, too, probably only a few weeks later - in the early part of the year 50 AD while he was there at Corinth.

<sup>14</sup> In the first verse, Paul refers to Jesus by the word “Lord.” This was the word regularly used to translate the special name for God, “YAHWEH,” in the Old Testament. *Κυριος* also held special meaning for Greeks. The word implied divinity to both Jews and Greeks. “Jesus” is His human name and would have reminded the Thessalonians of His identification with them “Christ” is the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew word “Messiah” - meaning anointed one. The combination of the three terms into one impressive title gives us compactly a view of a Person who alone can be ranked with God.

It is a letter addressed to a church body, the family of God in a given place, to commend us for what we are doing well and to urge us to press on toward congregational maturity.

The particular location to which this letter was sent, of course, was Thessalonica. And Thessalonica was a city that had everything that would have attracted Paul.<sup>15</sup>

It was strategically located on the main Roman road (The Ignatian Way) that led from Rome to the Orient.

And, as the capitol, it was the largest and most influential city in Macedonia.<sup>16</sup> Home to some 200,000 people, it ranked next to Corinth and Ephesus as the main seaport of the whole region.<sup>17</sup>

There was a strong Jewish community in the city, attested by the fact that there was a synagogue there. And the Greek population practiced a typical polytheistic religion.

In Acts 17:4, Luke tells us that the church that formed in Thessalonica was made up of all segments of the city's population.

***[Acts 17:4] And some of them (i.e. - the Jews) were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women.***

---

<sup>15</sup> Paul's usual method of operation was to seek out strategic population centers from which the faith might radiate out to the surrounding districts. And Thessalonica was certainly a strategic population center in ancient times. In 168 BC, when the Romans conquered Macedonia, they divided the area into four provinces and named Thessalonica one of the capitals. Then, two years later, they made Thessalonica the central capital of all the districts. Rome ruled Thessalonica with a loose hand.

<sup>16</sup> Thessalonica is one of the few cities that has survived from antiquity to the present. The city is a large and flourishing population center today. It is called Thessaloniki (formerly Salonika). During World War I, it served as an important Allied base, and in World War II it was captured by the German army, as the Jewish population of about 60,000 persons was deported and exterminated.

<sup>17</sup> There were hot springs in the area, so that the settlement that grew up alongside them was named "Therma." One ancient writer, Meletius, said, "So long as nature does not change, Thessalonica will remain wealthy and fortunate." The city was renamed *Thessalonica* in 315 BC by Cassander, after his wife, who was half sister to Alexander the Great.

During the time that Paul was with them, good things happened. People were converted. Lives were changed.

But, due to persecution, he had to leave prematurely, long before he would have wanted to go away.

He had not taught as deeply as he would have liked to have taught, had not told them as much about Jesus as he wanted to, had not instructed them in the ways of God enough, had not modeled the faith long enough.

He had to leave them early, and he was no doubt concerned for them. How would they fare in the absence of any nurturing, shepherding care?

Well, that question was answered when Timothy came to Paul in Corinth, having just been with the Thessalonians.

Paul and Silvanus and Timothy had been in Thessalonica only six to nine months earlier. And Timothy brought back news that they were doing GREAT! You can bet that Paul was thrilled with how they were doing.

And after a heartfelt prayer that God's grace and peace would be theirs in fullest measure, he goes on to tell us WHY he praises God every time he thinks about these folks.

Now, in the time remaining, we're going to travel backwards through the next three verses, beginning with verse five *en route* to hearing Paul's commendation.

In verse five Paul tells us how the Gospel made its entrance in Thessalonica.

## The Power of the Gospel IN Thessalonica (vv. 2-5)

### The Gospel's Arrival in Thessalonica (v. 5)

*[5] for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.*

*Brought NOT in word only*

When Paul and Silvanus and Timothy blew into Thessalonica, fresh from Philippi's jail, they arrived with apostolic authority. They were confident of the message they preached and so preached with great personal conviction.

They had seen the power of the resurrected Jesus change lives and had witnessed the Holy Spirit's miraculous effects. Those miracles came to Thessalonica as they had to Philippi.

Sure, they preached with words. But their message came with more than words. It came with power!

*Brought by men of character*

Then, too, Paul reminded the Thessalonians of how he and those with him behaved while they were with them. There had been no greediness, no chicanery, no graft, no man-pleasing. Paul lived to an audience of One - and he handled himself with the utmost integrity.

Integrity. Sacrifice. Faithfulness. These are the things that characterized those who brought the Gospel to the Thessalonians.

Of course the Gospel is true, even when it is preached by a liar! But the godly character of Paul and Silvanus and Timothy was a reassuring exclamation mark to the truth of the message they brought.

Move up one verse and we'll see that this message which was preached in Holy Spirit power by men of character was received with open arms in Thessalonica.

## The Gospel's Reception in Thessalonica (v. 4)

*[4] knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you*

Paul calls the Thessalonians to whom he was writing "*brethren beloved by God.*"

One year earlier, he would never have referred to anyone in Thessalonica that way. They were idolators far from God. Now, though, they are "*brothers.*" And he says that he is confident of God's choice of them.

How has he come to that confidence?

Well, no one places their trust in Jesus unless God takes the initiatives with them. The Bible is one long story of God taking the initiative with people who then respond to His overture.

And when the Holy Spirit convicts a person of their need for a Savior and then opens that person's eyes to the beauty of the cross of Christ and then convinces that person that the Savior they need is Jesus, that person will freely turn from whatever he or she had been trusting and will place the treasure of their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

They then become part of the family of God, someone we call "*brother*" or "*sister*" and they thereby prove that they have been chosen by God!

Paul smiled when he thought about these good friends in Thessalonica. They were his brothers and sisters in Christ.

And when he reflected on the report Timothy had brought back, he got even more excited, because Timothy's report assured him that their lives were being changed by the power of the Gospel.

As we listen to the words of verses two and three, where Paul describes the character of the church, there is no wonder as to why he gave thanks to God for them every time he prayed.

## The Gospel's Power in Thessalonica (vv. 2-3)

*[2] We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; [3] constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father*

They were excelling in faith, love, and hope, the three cardinal virtues of the Christian life.<sup>18</sup> But he phrases what he says about their faith, love and hope so strikingly...

### *Work of faith*

Here at Northwest we stand firmly by what we understand the Bible to teach about salvation. It is not of works. It is of faith! We are not saved by any good work we might do, but by God's grace energized by our faith.

Here, Paul combines the two words and commends the Thessalonians for their "*work of faith*" - and he's not contradicting himself. He's simply saying that their faith worked. Their FAITH in Jesus was energetic and resulted in WORK for Jesus.

Paul is grateful for more than their faith. He's grateful to God for their faithFULNESS. And this working faith was something that was so pervasive in the church that he commended them **ALL** for it.

It's just a phrase. Paul gives no content to the concept. Not a single specific illustration is given. But, we do get a picture of a congregation that is fully engaged in working for the Lord.

A congregation that is commended for its "*work of faith*" would have more than pockets of workers here and there. The overwhelming preponderance of the population of that church would be engaged in work for Jesus.

In Thessalonica, such a high percentage of people were engaged in working in missions and music and recovery ministries and Sunday School and youth ministry and video and sound production and Care Group leadership and Men's and Women's ministries and nursery and grounds maintenance and the food pantry and AWANA that Paul could say to the whole church, I thank God for "y'all's" work of faith.

And then he thanked God for their "*labor of love.*"

### *Labor of Love*

That church was known for how loving it was. Paul pictured the greater part of the church loving. But "*labor*" is different than "*work.*"

"*Work*" can be pleasant and stimulating. "*Labor*" (think "laborious"; "a woman in labor") is the grueling activity that continues on when the going gets tough.

There is great **reward** for work. There is great **cost** in labor. And the Thessalonians labored in love.

The word Paul used for love here is the Greek word *agape* (*αγαπη*). This is a word that was rarely used in the Greek language prior to the writing of the New Testament.

But the New Testament authors imported what they had come to understand about God's love into *agape*, and used it to describe distinctively Christian love.

When speaking or writing about love, the Greeks normally used another word - *eros* (*ερος*). *Eros* describes love as a pleasant experience, love between the sexes. There is nothing necessarily "erotic" about *eros*, but it is love for that which pleases us.

But, God's love - *agape* - is not like that. He loves us while our fists are shaking in His face, while we are still sinners, while we are not at all pleasing to Him.

And this is the kind of love the Thessalonians had been showing to each other.

<sup>18</sup> Romans 5:2-5; 1 Cor. 13:13; Gal. 5:5; Col. 1:4; Heb. 6:10-12, 10:22-24; 2 Peter 1:21ff.

As Paul thought about the kinds of relationships the Thessalonians sustained there in the church, he saw them laboring to love each other well.

It isn't easy to love when someone has acted unlovable, when someone has sinned against us, when someone has done something that violates all the rules. But Paul has heard from Timothy that even when church members were being porcupine with each other, love continued to flow. They labored on, lovingly.

And finally, the Thessalonians were commended for their ***“steadfastness of hope.”***

### *Steadfastness of Hope*

Hope, by definition, is future focused. We hope for what we have not yet received. And we are energized if there is a glimmer of hope for that thing we long for.

- Hope for a win motivates a team to play hard, even when it's behind in the closing minutes.
- Hope for a promotion motivates a minimum wage earning employee to hard work.
- Hope for an improved grade motivates a poor student to study hard.
- Hope for a win in November 2008 motivates a second-tier candidate to continue on the campaign trail.
- Hope for a good return on investment motivates a minor investor to diligent savings.
- Hope for a healthier marriage prompts a man and a woman to invest in marriage counseling when their relationship turns sour.

HOPE is a powerful commodity. It is a mighty weapon against stagnation and lethargy. It is a wonderful tool to fix the vegetative state to which many of us are, from time to time, tempted.

If, however, we have lost hope, energy dissipates, we resign ourselves to the *status quo*, toss in the towel, quit, give up.

When Paul commended the Thessalonians for their hopefulness, he didn't mean that they were in a particularly hopeful situation. He meant that in the midst of really tough circumstances, they refused to let go of their hope that all of God's promises would come to pass.

This was a church that was experiencing persecution. They were the minority in their city. Fiercely antagonistic foes were making life miserable for these Christians. Yet, as a church, they were remaining faithful. And that faithfulness was in place because they courageously refused to stop hoping for the future God had promised them in Christ.

### **Let's stop and think about this:**

What you and I have just seen is a description of a church to make an apostle smile.

I can only imagine Paul sitting in Corinth, lonely, having faced persecution and rejection at most of his recent Gospel stops. Then Timothy arrives from his fact-finding trip to Macedonia and tells Paul, *“All is well in Thessalonica. Our friends are living hopefully. They are loving each other well. They are being faithful”*

No doubt, individual faces came to Paul's mind as Timothy told the stories of all the good stuff that was going on. But the picture that emerges from these verses is of the church AS A WHOLE characterized by faith and love and hope.

It wasn't a perfect church by any means - the rest of the letter will show us that there was plenty of room for improvement! But with the three cardinal virtues - faith, love, hope - as the defining traits of the church, the rest was just details. How's THAT for a vision of the REAL church?

In one of His parables, Jesus quoted the master of certain faithful slaves as he told them, [Matthew 25:21] ***‘Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’***

It is my personal dream that Jesus will welcome me into glory with these words - ***“Well done, good and faithful slave!”***- and it is probably your dream, too.

Might we imagine that to faithful, loving, and hopeful congregations, Jesus would say, ***“Well done, good and faithful CHURCH”?***

It is a vision worth cherishing as we strive together to become a church to make Jesus smile.