

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

SERMON SERIES: Well done, good and faithful CHURCH

(studies in 1 Thessalonians)

The Source of World-Shaking Impact

Study #2

(1 Thessalonians 1:6--2:12)¹

Introduction: Character counts...

A seasoned pastor, preacher, and (for the last thirty years) seminary professor, Dr. Donald Sunukjian is also an expert in communication theory.

Years ago, Dr. Sunukjian wrote a short piece in a theological journal titled *The Preacher's Credibility*.² In this article, he demonstrated that the credibility given to a preacher is dependent on the congregation's perception of his **competency** and **character**. (Oh no - I'm giving away trade secrets!)

Competency is judged by things like attractive appearance, fluent delivery, organized message, and awareness of human events. Oh well...

By contrast, a congregation will judge a preacher high in character if they feel, "*I like him and he likes me.*"

And according to Sunukjian's research, a preacher's smile, more than any other single factor, communicates, "*I like you. You can trust me.*"

Based on a simplistic reading of the article, we might conclude, then, that all a preacher needs, or all a Christian leader needs, or all a Christian in any context needs, is a smile to be credible in ministry.

That conclusion, however, would not be warranted by a careful reading of the article and that conclusion would not be, in any meaningful sense, true.

Over the last several decades, wave after wave of missteps by influential Christians have proven over and over again: character counts.

A smile - or a wink and a smile - won't cut it.

Now, I don't say "character counts" judgmentally. Forgiveness follows sin and God is in the business of restoring and rebuilding broken lives. Grace trumps moral failure.

Nor do I say "character counts" in a mean-spirited way. I love many of the men and women who have committed atrocious acts. I have deep respect for a great many of them.

Several years ago, one of these men, Jim Bakker, wrote a book. When I heard the title, I almost wept. He called his book: I Was Wrong. Another, Gordon MacDonald, continues to mentor me through his writings and his current godly life.

And I don't say "character counts" pridefully. I'm no angel. Those who know me well know my warts, which are many. While I've not had my sins plastered on the front page of USA Today, that's due to God's protective grace and lack of opportunity more than anything else.

At the same time, while I don't want to speak judgmentally, mean-spiritedly, or pridefully, it is still true: character counts.

If a Christian hopes to make impact for Jesus, that Christian must pay attention to character. Character will be reflected in that Christian's relationships and in his or her moral decisions.

The same holds true for a church. Quality of relationships and matters of integrity will be of supreme importance for any church that wants to be a church of world-shaking impact.

World-shaking impact - that's what we want! And that's why we are working our way through the first letter of Paul to the Thessalonians.

¹ 1 Thessalonians was likely written not long after Timothy reached Paul (1 Thess. 3:6) in Corinth.

² Bibliotheca Sacra, 139, July-September, 1982, pp. 255-266.

We hope to learn here something about how we - Northwest Community Church - might maximize our impact for the Lord by moving toward congregational maturity.

So today, as we keep on moving through this letter, we'll give ourselves to a consideration of character, as measured by our integrity and the quality of our relationships.

In the first five verses of the letter, Paul gave us a picture of the kind of church that was in Thessalonica, a church known for its **faith**, **love**, and **hope**.

In the remainder of the first chapter, Paul lines out for us the kind of impact this faithful, loving, and hopeful church had.

The Impact of a Church Marked by Faith, Love and Hope (1:6-10)

[6] You also became imitators³ of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, [7] so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. [8] For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. [9] For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, [10] and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.

Pressure Cooker Christianity

Clearly, life as a Christian in Thessalonica was no bed of roses. Opposition was strong and persecution was a constant companion for the church from the get-go.

In verse six, Paul mentioned "**tribulation**." That is a word that, in other contexts, describes the process of pressing grapes when making wine. *Tribulation* refers to a crushing pressure.

³ "Imitate" denotes the mark left by a blow. See John 20:25, and Thomas' comments that he wanted to see the "imprint" of the nails in Jesus' hand before he believed.

In Thessalonica, external forces were trying to crush them for their decision to follow Christ. The church was under intense pressure.

(Maybe you've made decisions at certain points in your life, solely based on principle, that have made life a pressure cooker for you. If so, you know how the Thessalonians were feeling.)

But pressure is not an altogether bad thing...

Just as pressure applied to grapes produces wine, and just as pressure deep in the earth turns coal into diamonds, the pressure from the opposition was turning the Thessalonians into a church of unforgettable impact.

Imitation Christianity (the good kind!)

This church, only a few months old, took to imitating what they had seen in Paul, Timothy, Silvanus, and Luke while the apostolic company had been with them. They mimicked what they had come to know of Jesus from the missionaries.

Having received the Gospel with the joy the Holy Spirit gives, they were exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit⁴, were exercising the gifts given by the Holy Spirit and were enjoying the filling of the Holy Spirit!

And pretty soon, the imitators became the imitated as communities all around the Aegean Sea turned to the faith that the Thessalonians embraced. The mission field that had been Thessalonica became a missions sending church!

Paul says that this one year old church had become "**an example**." Interesting. Not a church full of examples - but one example. There was something about this congregation that testified to the Jesus they proclaimed.

This must have been some church! As Paul had traveled from Thessalonica, word about the vibrant faith of the Thessalonians preceded him.

⁴ Galatians 5:22-23 - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control.

Everywhere he went people were talking about the marvelous things that had happened to those Thessalonians. They had made a complete about face - turning FROM idolatry TO God. And now, he says - *“...the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you...”* *“...your faith toward God has gone forth...”*⁵

They were practicing imitation Christianity - imitating the apostles who were imitating Jesus!

Now, let's bring “imitation Christianity” home and learn something from this toddler congregation from the first century. Let's imagine that the following message written by a twenty first century observer, about a church you and I know well.

Bringing Imitation Christianity Home...

[6] You at Northwest Community Church also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, [7] so that you became an example to all the believers in northwest San Antonio and throughout Texas. [8] For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Bexar County and the whole Southwest, but also in every place - India, China, Southeast Asia, Morocco, Jordan - your faith toward God has gone forth...

Without question, God has blessed and used us here for a long time. Over the years we've seen Him do marvelous things. But, like every church, we hunger for more - more fervent worship, more genuine and loving community, and more effective impact on our world.

And to hear that kind of a report would be so fantastic!

The vision is that not only are you, personally, experiencing genuine life change and sharing the Word with those around you. You are also part of a community - a church - where passionate evangelism is the norm and where Great Commission exploits are routine and where impact for Christ is way out of proportion to the size of our congregation.

⁵ And Paul was grateful to have heard that fueling their zeal for outreach was a sober grasp of the fact that Jesus was coming back. The future was not in the hands of those who opposed them, but in the hands of the One who loved them best.

The vision is that our church is increasingly becoming a “*no matter what*” kind of church where we are desperate to get the word of Jesus out to those who have never heard through cross-cultural Missions and to those who may very well have heard next door to us.

So, how does a church - how do we - become this sort of a church?

Well, in spending time this past week with 1 Thessalonians, I have wondered if a big part of the answer to that question might be found in the passage before us.

And I've come to believe that Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, was pointing the way toward unforgettable impact when he recounted the moral and relational environment that had been nurtured in Thessalonica.

We'll see that environment in a minute. But first let's continue with a bit of history to the founding of the church.

Immediately after commending them for their “passionate pursuit of life-changing relationships with their world” (to coin a phrase), Paul reminds them of the occasion of his visit to the fair city of Thessalonica.

The Context Of Ministry In Thessalonica (2:1-2)

[2:1-2] For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain, [2] but after we had already suffered and been mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the boldness in our God to speak to you the gospel of God amid much opposition.

Suffering in Philippi (see Acts 16)

On the Second Missionary Journey, the first stop Paul made in Macedonia was at the city of Philippi. As we reviewed last Sunday, there was fruitful ministry there. People were saved, lives were changed, demons were cast out and a church was established.

But, foremost in Paul's mind as he writes here, was the difficulty he had while he was with the Philippians. He mentions suffering and mistreatment.

He and Silvanus were arrested for casting a demon out of a young slave girl whose masters were making a profit from her fortune telling.

Then, they were stripped of their clothing, beaten without benefit of a trial and placed in chains in the inner recesses of the Philippian jail, treated like hardened criminals.⁶

Life was tough in Philippi for Paul and his friends. And then after their release, they IMMEDIATELY hit the road to travel to Thessalonica to spread the liberating message of Jesus.⁷

(By the way, have you ever stopped to ask yourself, “*What kind of a person is it who, having been publicly beaten and unjustly imprisoned, leaves that frying pan for the fire of the next city?*”)

Suffering in Thessalonica (see Acts 17)

Over one hundred miles separated the two cities and must have required several days of travel. But as soon as they finished that grueling journey, Paul and the guys spoke out boldly in Thessalonica.

Their lacerated backs still stinging from Philippian beatings,⁸ they didn’t hesitate to preach the Gospel to the Thessalonians.⁹

And if it hadn’t been smooth sailing in Philippi, it wasn’t in Thessalonica, either! They were resisted and opposed from the outset.

Paul reminded them of how they had spoken [2]...*the gospel of God amid much opposition.*

⁶ As you read the passage in Acts 17, it is clear that Paul’s status as a Roman citizen had been violated and that he was justly outraged.

⁷ Luke tells us in Acts that they went through Amphipolis and Apollonia, but didn’t stop there. No reason is given as to why they didn’t engage in much ministry or spend much time there.

⁸ And I would guess their spirits had open sores from the insults they had endured.

⁹ By the way, how do you move when you have been recently injured? I limp when my leg hurts and carry myself differently when my back or arms are sore. Every one of the Thessalonians understood from watching Paul and company walk around town that being a Christian carried with it possibilities of dangerous consequences.

The word that my Bible translates “*opposition*” is, in Greek, *agoni*.¹⁰ It is the word from which we derive our English word “agony.”

Paul and Silvanus and Timothy experienced an agonizing sort of opposition the whole time they were in Thessalonica. And, while undergoing this hardship, Paul and his friends still used “*great boldness*” while evangelizing there!

Trusting solely in God, they were unfettered by fear.

THAT was the setting in which the church at Thessalonica was birthed. Opposed. Minority. Persecution.

And Paul moves from setting the context in which the church-planting visit had taken place to reminding his readers how he had behaved when he had been with them.

I’m going to suggest that what he lays out for us here is a model of **authentic** Christian ministry. And further, that **authenticity** lays the groundwork for ministry that changes the world.

We’ll first consider, negatively, what Paul did NOT do while he was with the Thessalonians.

The Character of Ministry In Thessalonica (vv. 3-12)

What Authentic Ministry is NOT! (vv. 3-6)

[2:3-6] *For our exhortation*¹¹ *does not come from error or impurity*¹² *or by way of deceit*¹³;

¹⁰ Greek - *αγωνι*. The word contains a metaphor drawn from the athletic games. And the idea is that of intense exertion, a strenuous persistent effort to overcome a determined and dangerous opponent. The verb form, *αγωνιζομαι*, refers to warfare.

¹¹ He calls his “preaching/teaching/evangelizing/etc.....” “exhortation.”

¹² Nor was his message tainted by sexual immorality. Isn’t it interesting that he brought up such a 2007 theme in a first century letter.? Truly, the sexually permissive society which was ancient Greece has remarkable parallels to our own day. In some religious sects, sexual activity was a part of the worship. And, in the day to day lives of the first century Thessalonians, strict morality was no more closely adhered to than today. Paul and Timothy and Silas brought a refreshing

[4] but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts.¹⁴ [5] For we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness— [6] nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority.

It is NOT flavored with deceit

Paul had been stopped blind in his tracks by the risen Christ on the Damascus Road.

Then he had seen the Gospel at work in his own heart, had been convinced from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah, had heard irrefutable evidence that Jesus rose from the dead and had witnessed its life-changing power in countless others.

He was convinced that the message he brought to the Thessalonians was TRUTH.

With Paul, what you saw was what you got. He wasn't out to pull the wool over anybody's eyes.¹⁵ Paul didn't "spin" his message so as to get a good hearing.

Positively, truth, purity and sincerity were the hallmarks of his ministry in Thessalonica. He was genuine, the real deal.

Then, too, while the message he brought (the Gospel) is a pleasant message, he was not, first and foremost, all about pleasing people.

distinctive when they came preaching Jesus. Here were men who weren't out for sexual conquest. They weren't touting a hedonistic lifestyle that leaves damaged souls in its wake. Purity won the day when Paul came to Thessalonica with the Gospel of Jesus.

¹³ Deceit - originally a reference to catching fish by means of bait.

¹⁴ Heart does not equal affections. It stood for the whole of the inner life, comprising thought and will as well as emotions. Here the meaning is that God searches out the whole of our inner life. Nothing is hidden from Him.

¹⁵ *Peripatetics* ("walk-around teachers") were common in the first century Greek world. Among them were some sincere teachers and seekers after truth. But shyster-ism was not unknown in the first century.

It is NOT about "people pleasing" or flattery

The idea of pleasing people surfaces throughout Paul's writings. Sometimes it is good to try to please someone.

In Romans 15 we read, ***[1] Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. [2] Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.***

In that case, to "please" someone means that we serve them. That's a good thing.

There are times, though, when we have to choose whether we will please people or whether we will please the Lord.

And of all the marks of spiritual maturity - be it personal or congregational - one of the most certain is the presence of a commitment to do things that please the Lord, even if those things displease people.

In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul wrote, ***[9] Therefore, we have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him.***¹⁶

There was this God-centeredness about Paul that protected him from giving in to the temptation to give people what they *wanted* at the expense of what they *needed*.

In our day, physicians bind themselves by a sacred oath to work for a patient's health, even if that means prescribing foul-tasting medicines, recommending painful surgeries, or advising lifestyle changes that are not at all what the patient would want to adopt.

When physicians prescribe medications that taste better but don't work as well, or don't recommend a needed surgical procedure because it would be painful, or neglect to mention a lifestyle change that could aid health, they are guilty of *malpractice*.

Paul would have been guilty of apostolic malpractice had he only said pleasant things. If he had only *flattered* them, told them what they *wanted* to hear, that would have been inauthentic.

¹⁶ See also Galatians 1:10; Ephesians 6:6; Colossians 1:10.

Instead, he trusted God and told the Thessalonians what they *needed* to hear. He gave them the tough medicine of exhortation, knowing full well that, sometimes, they wouldn't be pleased.

And finally, simply put, Paul was not in it for the money.

It is NOT motivated by greed

There would have been nothing wrong had Paul sought financial support from those to whom he ministered. It is perfectly all right to do that. BUT, Paul chose to not do this in Thessalonica because he didn't want to confuse anyone.

He was presenting a message of grace - the free gift of God. And to have received money for his ministry might have created a disconnect for them - "Pay me money for bringing a message of free grace." (Hmmm...).

So, Paul decided to work with his own hands to support himself so that everyone would see that he was NOT motivated by greed for money.¹⁷

Now, in writing what he has in these verses, part of what Paul may have been doing was defending himself against attacks from the opposition. That is, some people might have been accusing him of inauthenticity - and he feels the need to contradict that. But, if that was part of what he was doing, I don't think that that was the main thing he was doing.

I think he is saying to his readers - then and now - that when a ministry is marked by integrity, seen in a refusal to "spin" and in a commitment to please the Lord and in a lack of greed, the foundation is laid for tremendous impact for Jesus.

Character counts. Integrity is a big piece of the character that counts. And so are relationships.

The church at Thessalonica had tremendous impact in its world, and the second part of the foundation for that impact was laid when Paul modeled the kind of relationships that, if sustained, make for great impact.

The description Paul gives of himself and of his style of relating in the verses that follow may seem a bit odd at first. But he knows what he's doing. And what he's saying and the way he says it leaves an indelible impression with us who read his words.

What Authentic Ministry IS (vv. 7-12)

The mother image: Genuine ministry is all about nurture and love and giving (vv. 7-8)

[2:7-8] But we proved to be gentle¹⁸ among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for¹⁹ her own children. [8] Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us.

As I read these words, I wonder if Paul's detractors in Thessalonica had charged that Paul didn't really love them very much.

For evidence, they could point to the fact that he had not stayed with them very long and that he had left them hastily (under cover of night, no less!) and that he had not come back. Opponents in Thessalonica might have said that Paul had deserted them, had never really cared for them.

So here, Paul affirms his love. And to bring to minds how genuine his love was, he borrows the imagery of a mother. This is "mother Paul."

His words fairly ooze with mother figures. On the one hand there are the emotion-charged words that depict the depth of feeling Paul had for them - words like "*gentle*" and "*tender*" and "*fond affection*" and "*very dear*."

¹⁷ It is legitimate to pay those who serve in Jesus' Name (not required, but legitimate; there are plenty of New Testament passages that teach that). But, *greediness* (the word is actually a combination of two Greek words, implying "*a hunger to have more*") crosses a line.

¹⁸ Some believe that the word "gentle" should be read "babes."

¹⁹ *θαλαπη* - cares for, to warm; used of birds covering their young with their feathers to warm and protect them.

Equally important is the **action** that arose from the **affections**. While he and his friends were with the Thessalonians they gave the Gospel message. But that is not all they gave. They also gave themselves.

Their sharing went beyond official duty. They poured out their innermost self for the Thessalonians.

And if apostles in the first century “mothered” a congregation to maturity, then a church in the twenty-first century will also need mothering care. And not just from the mothers!

Paul was no mother. But he mothered them. And whether you are literally a mother or not, this church will not be the healthy, impactful church it is designed to be unless you imitate the very best traits of the very best mothers you know as you interact with others here.

If you have the incredible privilege of teaching a Sunday School class, give **yourself** as well as the Scriptures. If you are leading a Bible study, by all means communicate God’s truth - but don’t forget to **pour out your soul**. If you are involved in a Care Group, **care for** the others in your group. As you hang with your brothers and sisters here, let them know that they are very dear to you.

Let tenderness and gentleness flow from you to those who need it. If you see someone who appears sad and lonely, unusually quiet and withdrawn, be the courageous one who approaches and makes eye contact and gives a warm greeting.

The nurture and care that we often think of flowing from a mother’s heart must flow from all of us to each other IF we are to become a church of unforgettable impact.

Then, Paul speaks again, further reminding the Thessalonians of the way he dealt with them. Here there is the example of another family figure.

The father image: Providing, leading, exhorting (vv. 9-12)

[9] For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship,²⁰ how working night and day²¹ so as not to be a burden to any of you,²² we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. [10] You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; [11] just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children,²³ [12] so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.

This is strong language. I call it fathering language.

Provision

There is, within fathers, a strong desire to provide for their children. As a dad, I want to provide for my children. (Now, in a few years, I’ll be happy to be a mooch on my adult kids, but not quite yet...) Paul provided the Thessalonians with the riches of the Gospel while not requiring them to support him.

Example

There is also within fathers a longing to be an example to their kids.

²⁰ The thoughts behind the two words are of weariness and fatigue, continued strenuous activity, and exhaustion.

²¹ And we read that he worked “night and day.” This likely means that he was gainfully employed in Thessalonica - and that he ministered “*on the side*.” We discover elsewhere in the New Testament that Paul knew the tent-making trade. The Jews insisted that every father teach his son a trade. To not do so, according to rabbinic thought, was to consign him to begging if times got tough. And we know that Paul made tents at Thessalonica, Corinth (Acts 18:3) & Ephesus (Acts 20:34).

²² Some have suggested that Paul’s refusal to ask for money from the Thessalonians proves that they were mostly poor people. However, Jason (spoken of in Acts 17) was evidently a man of some means. Remember that Paul also did not receive a contribution from the Corinthians, many of whom were likely well off. He sometimes followed this practice to maintain an irreproachable reputation with respect to money when dealing with new Christians.

²³ Scholars have noted that paternal images are present in Paul’s writings only when he writes to churches he has been instrumental in establishing.

We dads love the idea of our children thinking to themselves, “*I want to be like dad.*” Or, “*I want to marry a man like dad.*” Or “*I want dad’s integrity, his faith, his walk with God, his capacity to love.*” Paul showed the Thessalonians the way to live. He was an example to them.

Leadership

And it is not uncommon for fathers to urge their children on to greater and to better things. (Not that mothers do not do this, too!)

They want their sons and daughters to make a weighty contribution to the world. They want the world to be a better place because of their children’s gifts. So, we urge them on. Paul’s words are “*exhort and encourage and implore.*” So we dads say, “*Come on, kids, status quo isn’t good enough! Reach higher! Go farther! Try something new! You can do it!*”

Friends, not all of us here this morning are fathers. But I have seen many men, women and young people carry out fathering roles here.

- You who are in elementary school and in Middle School - what a wonderful fathering gift you give when you serve as an example to those who are a year or two younger than you are!
- High schoolers - You lead in Vacation Bible School, on Wednesdays with AWANA and with Middle School, at Basketball Camp. You are, in Paul’s words, “fathering” those younger than you with your example and energy and your passion.
- College aged young adults have such a rich store of experience to share with those who are younger in a fatherly way.
- Adults here - men and women - have been equipped with wisdom, with life experience, and with a heart to see those coming behind us do better than we have done. There are people here who need your provision, example, and leadership.

I want to assure everyone here that you can have what I’m calling today a fathering role with someone here. Further, we NEED what you have to offer.

There is someone here who needs the leadership you and only you can provide, who needs the strong words of exhortation that you have for them. And if you withhold these gifts, our church will be the weaker for it.

Finally, you’ll notice that in verse 9, Paul called the Thessalonians, “***brethren.***”

The brother image

Not only did Paul provide mothering care and fatherly leadership. When he was in Thessalonica, he never forgot that he and they were a band of brothers (women included!).

Nineteen times in five chapters Paul makes reference to the fact that he and the Thessalonians were “brothers.”

Calling them “brethren” was a way to remind them, “*We’re in this together. We’re serving Jesus shoulder to shoulder. We labor together, pray together, serve together, weep together, fight for truth together. We, bind up the wounded and forgive the offender and walk each other to maturity.*”

If you have people here for whom you are providing care and people to whom you are giving leadership, GREAT! But, the picture is not complete if there is no one with whom you are linking arms as a “brother” in ministry.

Conclusion:

It takes more than a smile for a Christian or for a church to establish credibility with a world in need of what Jesus has to offer. It requires character. Character counts! It did in the first century and it does in 2007, too.

And “character” - as I’m defining it today, consists of *integrity of life and quality of relationship.*

When we are ALL sincerely serving the Lord, looking for ways to nurture and care for the hurting, leading and exhorting those come after us, and banding together with friends to serve the Lord, we’ll be well on our way to world-shaking impact.