

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

SERMON SERIES: Well done, good and faithful CHURCH

(studies in 1 Thessalonians)

GREAT Gifts You Can Give

(1 Thessalonians 3:1-13)

Study #5

Introduction: Absence makes the heart grow fonder...

I was in Russia in February of 2002. It was cold, as I recall. And, as I recall, I was lonely and homesick.

Being a long way away from home for a couple of weeks at a time is tough on me. So, I whine a lot. Still, taking advantage of open doors to serve the Lord - even if it means being away from loved ones for a while - is something I love to do. And Kathy and I have decided that it is something I should do. So I eagerly go on Missions trips (while returning even more eagerly!)

When I'm in Russia, I've developed a pattern of staying in touch with Kathy, with my kids, and with you, my church family, as much as I can. Part of that "staying-in-touchness" involves a phone call every three days or so. I usually call early in the morning, Russia time (about 6am), which connects me to San Antonio at 10pm the previous day (it's weird, I know; trust me).

In 2002, I called Kathy one morning/night, and she started complaining of being frustrated and cold. I, too, was frustrated and cold, and since misery loves company, I asked her what was wrong.

She told me that the people from whom we had just purchased a home had rather thoughtlessly turned off the utilities just as a bitter cold snap had hit San Antonio.

She had spent all of the previous day sitting in an unheated house (I think there had even been an ice storm) waiting for the gas company to turn on the gas. They never came.

So there I was, in Russia, and there was nothing I could do to help her. I couldn't turn on the gas. I couldn't add a blanket to keep her warm or take her place in the cold kitchen. I couldn't throttle the previous owners for turning off the utilities.

It is frustrating to be unable to help those you love when they are in a pickle.

Those of us who have kids of college age know what it's like to not be able to help when they are in some special need. Wives and husbands of those in the military suffer when their spouse goes on a long TDY or into harm's way for the same reason.

We want to be able to help those we love. That's what love does. It is perfectly understandable when we are concerned for those we love when we are not with them.

That kind of concern is validated in the passage in front of us this morning as we see the concern of the Apostle Paul for the people he loved who lived in Thessalonica.

Even though separated by hundreds of miles, he did help them. And he helped them in creative and sacrificial ways. And we are going to examine both of his loving actions this morning. I believe that we will be challenged to follow his leadership into a loving path that will bring blessing to those we love who are far away AND to those who are near.

Let's back into our time in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians this morning by looking first at the book of Acts.

Acts chronicles the history of the early church from about AD 33 until about AD 68. In Acts we find places that we can identify on maps today. Acts records concrete history. The Christian story is rooted in history, not in myth or legend, and not in ideas.

That is why it is so important to spend time in Acts. The church was not established in Middle-earth (Lord of the Rings) or Narnia (The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe) or at Hogwarts (Harry Potter).

NO! God's work in and through the church took place in real time. And the better we understand the history we find in Acts, the better we'll understand the workings of God in His church - then and now.

From the cold, hard historical record we find in Acts we know that Paul and Silvanus (also called Silas) and Timothy traveled together to the Macedonian city of Thessalonica around AD 50. We know that within a few weeks, hostilities arose there against the Christians in the city for preaching the Gospel.

When the opposition became so intense that it wasn't safe for the missionaries to stay, the believers in Thessalonica "*sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea.*" (Acts 17:10)

Paul and Silas left. That means that Timothy stayed behind. He probably stayed in Thessalonica for a few days to shore up the work in Paul's and Silas' absence.

Think about what that says about Timothy and about Paul's trust in him. He was **spiritually mature** enough to carry on the work in Paul's absence. He was **reliable** enough to be counted on to do what needed to be done. He was **committed** enough to stay in a place that had already proven dangerous. Timothy was a jewel.

After a short while, though, Timothy left Thessalonica and joined Paul and Silas in another city, Berea. Berea was an inland city some fifty miles away from Thessalonica - a two to four days journey.

Very quickly, persecution rose to a fever pitch in Berea, as it had in Thessalonica. And the believers there sent Paul away by himself, while Timothy and Silas stayed to work a bit more among the Berean converts.¹

And what about Paul? Well, he was escorted from Berea as far as Athens. That would have been a very long trip consisting of several hundred miles - some of it by sea - lasting at least 2-3 weeks.

¹ Acts 17:4

Upon his arrival at Athens, Paul told his Berean escorts to tell (the Bible says "command") Timothy and Silas - who were still back in Berea - to come to him as soon as possible.²

While their coming to Paul in Athens is not mentioned in Acts, I think it is best to assume that they did come to Paul while he was in Athens.³

While there, though, the three of them couldn't get the Thessalonians out of their minds.

There they were, young Christians, new converts, only a few months old in the Lord. They didn't have the benefit of an older Christian to mentor them. They weren't well established. AND they were facing persecution from the same people who had kicked the apostles out of town!

Paul and Silas and Timothy were worried sick about the Thessalonians.

Timothy had been there a few days more than Paul and Silas, having stayed behind after Paul and Silas were sent out of the city. But he, like the other two, was concerned.

So, the three of them put their heads together and came up with a plan that would offer support to these suffering brothers and sisters back in Macedonia.

They didn't send a message. Paul didn't write a letter. They didn't send an email. They sent Timothy. That's right, when you care enough to send the very best, you send a person.⁴

² Acts 17:15

³ In this, I am in agreement with Bible scholars, Leon Morris and D. Edmond Hiebert who have argued for this chronology together in their commentaries.

⁴ How was Timothy able to return to Thessalonica when Paul evidently was not allowed to? It might be that Timothy had not raised the ire of the Thessalonian officials as Paul had (Paul being the leader of the missionary force), and so was able to cycle back to Thessalonica without causing added difficulties.

When You Care Enough To Send The Very Best (vv. 1-8)

CONCERN Translates to ACTION (vv. 1-5)

A strategic plan (vv. 1-2)

[1] Therefore when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone, [2] and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith

Timothy - traveling man

[1a] Therefore when we could endure it no longer...

Paul speaks of them not being able to endure a certain hardship any longer than they already had. This hardship that they couldn't endure was the hardship of not being with, not knowing the welfare of, not being able to help the Thessalonian believers.

So Timothy, having just arrived in Athens from Berea, was going to travel back, alone, to Thessalonica.⁵

That's a lot of travel - and despite what you may have heard, travel ain't all it's cracked up to be!

Do you travel much? Is so, do you enjoy the traveling? (I didn't think so...)

Travel is a hassle. With gas prices going up and freeway traffic a mess, it's a hassle to drive. And flying is really a mess (pity those traveling this Thanksgiving holiday!) with long waits and delayed flights and missed connections.

⁵ We know that for at least part of the time that Paul was in Athens, he served alone. Silas and Timothy evidently came to him as soon as they were able. The three of them came to the decision to send Timothy to Thessalonica. And then Paul and Silas must have decided that it would be best for Silas to leave, too, and go back to Macedonia! (Some have suggested that he went to Philippi or Berea.) In this way, Paul was in Athens alone, as Acts tells us. And he was later joined by both Timothy and Silas who came to him in Corinth from Macedonia, Timothy, in particular, with good news from Thessalonica.

There would have been none of these headaches for the first century traveler. But, he would have had to worry about bandits out to rob him on the remote roads, exposure to all the whims of weather, exhaustion from all the walking, sea-sickness when on board a boat, travel expenses, finding decent lodging in small villages and more.

Travel was no picnic in Paul's day. And Timothy's itinerary was brutal.

Consider his travels on this missionary journey with Paul. He had left his hometown of Lystra to go with Paul.

And then they had traveled through the treacherous and mountainous regions of Galatia and Phrygia to Troas, across the Aegean Sea to Philippi, then through Amphipolis and Apollonia, on to Thessalonica, to Berea to Athens - and now he's going back to Thessalonica. How exhausting!

This kind of travel takes a toll on a person. It was costly. But Timothy's trip back to Thessalonica wasn't just costly to Timothy. Sending Timothy cost Paul dearly.

Timothy - a costly gift

[1b]...we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone, [2a] and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ

Paul and Silas and Timothy were in Athens when the decision was made to split up. They were far from home. These three men were partners in what was for all of them a magnificent obsession: Spread the Gospel as far and wide as possible as quickly as possible as deeply as possible!

For Paul to send Timothy would have been like sending his right arm.

Because they both called God "Father" Paul can call Timothy "**brother.**" But the word conjures up more than spiritual genetics. It's a word chosen to picture personal closeness. These two men relied on each other. They were friends.

And Timothy is also “*God’s fellow worker.*” While *brother* speaks of chemistry, “*God’s fellow worker*” speaks of competence and character. Remember,

- Timothy was the one Paul had trusted with the work of staying behind in Thessalonica when he and Silas left town due to persecution.
- Timothy was responsible for completing the initial equipping of the Thessalonians in Paul’s absence.
- Timothy and Silas were both entrusted with the spiritual aftercare in Berea when Paul had to flee.

Portraits of Timothy as a young, shy, introverted man with no passion are simply not accurate. He was fit for spiritual warfare. He was a man of God.

And I’ve got to believe that Timothy would have been helpful to Paul right where he was. In Athens, another partner hanging around to interact with the philosophers on Mars Hill would have been a good thing.⁶ On the road, somebody else to carry stuff would have been a blessing. In Corinth, somebody else to look for lodging and establish a ministry beachhead would have taken a load off of Paul.

But because of Paul’s love for the God who had saved him, his passion for Jesus’ Great Commission, and his love for the Thessalonians, he was willing to do without this treasure of a partner. Paul willingly gave Timothy up to the Thessalonians for the sake of their spiritual growth.

And that - the Thessalonians’ spiritual growth and strengthening - was precisely what Paul and Silas and Timothy agreed was what was needed and what Timothy was uniquely fitted to provide.⁷

Today, when we want to increase strength, we may avail ourselves of a personal trainer. Timothy was going to Thessalonica to be these young Christians’ personal *spiritual* trainer.

⁶ Paul spent a brief time in Athens (Acts 17:16-34). He preached a memorable message, saw some fruit - and then left for Corinth.

⁷ Paul feared that a premature departure from Thessalonica had meant that there had not been sufficient time to establish them in the faith. So, Timothy went to complete what was lacking in their foundation.

Timothy - a “personal *spiritual* trainer”

[2b]...to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith

Paul was concerned about the Thessalonians’ spiritual fitness. They were untrained. They were immature. They lacked spiritual coordination (the ability to wisely navigate life in a way that honors God). They needed strength.

And the two words that describe Timothy’s purpose in going to Thessalonica both describe the strengthening process.

His assignment was to bring the Thessalonians along, to chart for them a course through strengthening⁸ and encouragement.⁹

So, picture Timothy teaching and explaining the ways of God and telling stories about Jesus to these Christians. Picture him hanging with them, being their friend, praying with them and cheering them on.

These are the things that any young believer needs. And I’m sure Timothy did all of this and more when he went back to Thessalonica.

There was every reason to have been concerned for these new Christians. They needed a personal trainer like Timothy, because their Christian lives were anything but easy!

We saw some of this last Sunday when we observed the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. Here, Paul reminds us of the hardships they endured.

Great (and fearful) expectations (vv. 3-5)

[3] so that no one would be disturbed¹⁰ by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this.

⁸ Strengthen - by adding support, as a buttress.

⁹ Encourage - parakalew, the word used in John’s Gospel to describe the Holy Spirit’s ministry in the heart of the believer - can mean anything from encouragement to exhortation.

¹⁰ The word we translate “disturbed” (in verse 3) can also mean, “to shake, to sway back and forth” and was used of a dog wagging his tail. From this, it came to mean “to fawn over, to flatter” - conveying the thought of being deceived.

[4] For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know. [5] For this reason, when I could endure it no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor would be in vain.¹¹

Paul had not stayed in Thessalonica long enough to teach these new converts all that he would have taught them if there had been more time. But, if there had been points of doctrine that he had not taught, one theme that Paul had faithfully stressed was suffering. Clearly and repeatedly he had assured them that suffering was coming.

Suffering wouldn't have been a surprise. They had been told about it. They had seen it. They were confident that they would experience it. From day one, a warning had been affixed to the binding of their Bibles:

THE APOSTLE PAUL HAS DETERMINED THAT FOLLOWING JESUS MAY BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH.¹²

We know that Paul endured beatings and stonings and shipwrecks and imprisonments - all because he was following Jesus.

The Thessalonians had watched Paul get kicked out of their city, had heard about his having been beaten in Philippi, and knew that he had suffered persecution in Berea.

¹¹ Paul took it for granted that Satan had been active in Thessalonica. The one who tempted Jesus can be expected to tempt Jesus' followers! And he was concerned that the activity of the enemy might have made his whole trip to Thessalonica worthless.

¹² In 1966, the following was placed on the packs of cigarettes - "Caution: Cigarette Smoking May be Hazardous to Your Health." In 1970, that was strengthened to read, "Warning: The [Surgeon General](#) Has Determined that Cigarette Smoking is Dangerous to Your Health." Today, because of our knowledge of the dangers of cigarette smoking, the warnings may include any or all of the following, "SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING: Smoking Causes Lung Cancer, Heart Disease, Emphysema, And May Complicate Pregnancy; Quitting Smoking Now Greatly Reduces Serious Risks to Your Health; Smoking By Pregnant Women May Result in Fetal Injury, Premature Birth, And Low Birth Weight; Cigarette Smoke Contains Carbon Monoxide.

So, when he warned them that suffering coming, they listened. (And here, because they were so new in the faith, he reminds them that he had told them - "*See, it happened just like I told you it would!*")

Yet even though they had been forewarned, would they stand strong in the face of persecution? Paul was concerned and THAT concern is why Timothy was sent to Thessalonica.

Well, as he writes this letter (1 Thessalonians), Timothy has just returned from Thessalonica. He has joined Paul in Corinth and has brought back news of how the church in Thessalonica is doing - and they are doing great!¹³

Rejoicing Over the BEST News (vv. 6-8)

A good progress report (v. 6)

[6] But now that Timothy has come to us from you,¹⁴ and has brought us good news (literally - GOSPEL!)¹⁵ of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you...

Their faith was intact. Timothy had equipped them with truth that gave them the strength they needed to stand firm, despite persecution. He had come alongside of them, encouraging them to continue on with the Lord.

¹³ This does not mean that his fears had been unwarranted. Knowing the fierceness of the enemy attack and the fickleness of human nature, Paul's fears were altogether reasonable. Had Timothy not been sent, who knows how the Thessalonians' walk with the Lord might have gone?

¹⁴ Verse 6 of our passage communicates something of the excitement Paul experienced in receiving Timothy's report. The Greek grammar implies that Paul received the news from Timothy and sat down immediately to write this letter! One commentator even renders the beginning of verse 6, "*When Timothy reached me a moment ago....*" (Moffatt). Whether that is true or not, we can't be certain.

¹⁵ The greek word for "good news" here is the same word Paul uses to describe the essential Christian message - *εὐαγγελίζομαι* = Gospel)

They were trusting the Lord. They were loving. And wherever there is a good measure of faith and love in a church, that church is doing well.¹⁶

Paul also breathed a huge sigh of relief when he learned that the Thessalonians hadn't believed the lies that the opposition had told about him.

It turns out that just as their **faith** was intact, so was their **affection** for Paul and Timothy and Silas.

That news about the Thessalonians' steadfastness thrilled Paul's heart. But it did more than that. The good progress report Timothy has brought back has invigorated him!

The effect of a good progress report (vv. 7-8)

[7] for this reason, brethren, in all our distress and affliction we were comforted about you through your faith; [8] for now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord.

Paul and Timothy and Silas felt that they had been given a new lease on life when they found out how well the Thessalonians were doing.

Before, there had been the dead weight of apprehension. Were the Thessalonians walking with the Lord? Now the answer has come: YES!

So now, the apostles REALLY LIVE!

And here is something very important. You and I knew that the Thessalonians' spiritual lives were nurtured by the spiritual health and vitality of Paul, Silas and Timothy. That just stands to reason. They brought the Gospel and established the new Thessalonian believers in the faith.

Now we learn that Paul, Silas and Timothy were spiritually enriched by the spiritual health and vitality of the Thessalonians! We talk about interdependence, and here it is in living color.

In the same way, you are in an interdependent relationship with each other in the church. Your spiritual life is enriched by the vitality of others. The spiritual life of those others is enriched by your vitality.

None of us are as strong and healthy in Christ alone as we are when those around us are also standing firm. That's part of what it means to be a "body" of Christ. We need each other. We are better together.

Your own spiritual health impacts those around you. And, if you are not spiritually healthy, that spiritual dis-ease will drain vitality from those around you.

One of the many reasons we each are to fervently follow the Lord is that to do so is to lovingly support our friends. People you love benefit from your walk with Jesus.

Stop and Consider...

So we leave this section of Paul's letter with the new converts AND the apostles in great shape, spiritually. Paul, Timothy and Silas are really living. The Thessalonians are standing firm in the Lord.

And let's not miss that a big piece of the reason for the Thessalonians' firm stand was the costly gift Paul gave to them. He sent Timothy to them at a time when he himself would have benefited greatly by Timothy's presence.

His gift, a relational gift, had huge impact. The impact of a gift is often directly proportional to the personal sacrifice involved in giving that gift.

Let's remember that truth this gift-giving season.

Back in October, I told you that we were going to seek to re-ignite the Advent season here at Northwest and remember Jesus' birth in a fresh way. One of the keys to re-igniting Advent involves what we're calling "relational gift-giving."

Since we are looking to make impact on those we love by the gifts we give, let's take a cue from Paul and notice that the most impactful gift was the most personal one.

¹⁶ In another place, Paul says that the only thing that means anything in Christ Jesus is faith working through love, and that in the church Christians are to be busy serving one another through love. (Galatians 5:6,13)

This Christmas, when deciding on what gifts to give to friends and family, try something different than simply going to the store. Try giving a truly costly gift of something made, something involving creativity, something costing an investment of time.

With the official start to the “Xmas rush” (as opposed to CHRISTmas) just days away, NOW is the time to determine that you will give the kinds of gifts that will really cost (time, energy, thought) - and these are the gifts that will make lasting impact.

And what if we were to apply Paul’s example of sacrificial gift-giving to our lives together? What if we were to increasingly become a church where relational giving was the norm?

Well, I think that would mean that we would aim for the most personal contact possible with each other. If we know that a friend is going through a tough time, we’ll send them a thoughtful email if email is all we can do. Better yet, we’ll take the time to make a call. Better still, we’ll look for a way to make a face-to-face visit.

It’s been said over and over - and it’s still true. In this high-tech world, we need, more than ever, high-touch relating. The more personal, the most costly. But the more personal, the better.

Paul gave to the Thessalonians a gift that cost him dearly. God used that gift (Timothy!) to establish the church in that city.

And since you long for the spiritual growth of one, two, three (or more) people, why not start thinking about what sacrificial service might you perform that would assure that person/those people of your love and of your heart for their spiritual development?

Might you consider meeting with this person for Bible study?
 Might you consider serving with them in a ministry venture?
 Might you consider buying them a Christian book that would help establish them in the faith - and then going through that book with them?

Let’s imitate the example we find in Paul and give feet to our faith and love extravagantly.

And there was one more gift of love that Paul was willing to give the Thessalonians. This one more thing would cost him dearly in terms of time and energy.

He could pray.

An Effective Prayer Ministry (3:9-13)

A Sincere Prayer of Heartfelt THANKSGIVING (vv. 9-10)

[9] For what thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account, [10] as we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith?

Paul was quick to pray. We can’t read his letters without the sense that he spent a lot of time and expended a lot of energy in prayer.

And (this sounds silly to say, but it is not pointless) as we observe his prayers, we note that they are God-centered.

Notice that in verses nine and ten, Paul neither credited himself with being a good apostle, nor the Thessalonians for being good Christians, but God for His grace in the fact that the Thessalonians have continued stable and growing in Christ.

***Thanksgiving being just around the corner, can you think of someone in whom you have seen the Lord at work recently? Why don’t you stop (right now, in the middle of the Worship Service!) and thank God for His life-changing work.

Paul’s prayer continues, as he ask for other good things for his friends.

A Dependent Prayer for Renewed FELLOWSHIP (v. 11)

[11] Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you

He prays for face to face fellowship. And, from other places, we understand that Paul wanted to bring spiritual blessing to these dear brothers and sisters.

But, again, notice his “God consciousness” as he prays. He submits to the sovereignty of God in asking that God would direct their way to the Thessalonians. He, Paul, will work out an itinerary, make a plan, set the route for travel.

But, he understands that his plans are not the final determiner in whether the visit happens or not. God is in control. Paul understands and submits to that control. Yet he knows that he is invited to ask away - so ask he does!

***Is there someone you love from whom you are currently separated by a great distance? Why not take a moment (right now, in the middle of the Worship Service) to pray for them and for renewed fellowship with them soon? Pray that when you come together you and they will be spiritually enriched.

Next, Paul prays for the Thessalonian’s growth in love.

Fervent Prayer for ABOUNDING LOVE (v. 12)

[12] and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you¹⁷

Paul has captured the heart of the Lord Jesus in offering this prayer for the health of the church. The words of Jesus may have come to your mind as I read verse 12. *“This is My commandment, that you love one another.”* and *“By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”*

¹⁷ See also our monthly memory verse: 1 Thes. 4:9; 10b - *Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; [10]...But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more*

What is pictured here is an ever-growing, expansive embrace of more and more people by our love. One ancient pastor (John Chrysostom) asked of this passage, *“Do you see the unchecked madness of love which is indicated by these words?”*

No church has ever mastered love. No church has ever arrived when it comes to love. Paul’s prayer should always be before us and every church: keep increasing, keep abounding, keep growing!

***Jesus, Paul and Christians through the ages have put a premium on love. Why not take a moment (right now, in the middle of the Worship Service) to pray that you yourself AND the people you know will grow in their capacity to love? Pray that love will increasingly mark the relationships here at Northwest.

Finally, Paul prays for the Thessalonians’ holiness.

A Passionate Request for HOLINESS (v. 13)

[13] so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.

He asks for holiness. This is a request for moral purity. This is a prayer for increasing involvement in the plans and purposes of God.

***Holiness is God’s will for His people. Why not take a moment right now (right now in the middle of the Worship Service) to pray for the holiness, the moral purity, the set-apartness to God and His purposes of the people you love?

Stop and Consider:

Friends, the Apostle Paul had a heart and a vision for the Thessalonian church - so he prayed. If you and I have a heart and a vision for the people we love and for our church, we, too, will pray. There is no greater way to express our dependence on God than by way of prayer. It is the ultimate act of empty hands longing for what only God can provide. If we are to become the church Jesus has formed us to become, we must increasingly become a church that gives relationally and a church that prays. Brothers and sisters, let us pray!!