



1 Thessalonians 2:13-20
 Living as Followers of Jesus
 “God’s Word at Work”

Rev. Brian North
 October 20th, 2024

This morning, we continue our series on Paul’s first letter to the church in Thessalonica, a port city in Greece. Paul established this church during his travels to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. Today, we’ll look at 1 Thessalonians 2:13-20, a passage covering various topics without a clear, single theme—though one underlying idea might be “God’s Word at Work,” which is also the title of this sermon. While the passage is wide-ranging, I hope that at least one of its four key points will resonate with you, encouraging or gently challenging you in your faith journey, wherever you are on that path. We’ll read the passage in pieces today, starting with **verse 13**. So let’s pray, and then we will dive in.

Paul begins this section by expressing his gratitude for the Thessalonians’ reception of the Word of God. This continues the thankfulness for them that he began the letter with in the first chapter, and really kind of permeates everything he’s written thus far. Here, in particular, we see Paul’s deep gratitude to God for the Thessalonians’ faith. But even then, he recognizes that their acceptance of the gospel is not merely an intellectual agreement to human teaching but is the result of a divine work. The gospel message that Paul and his companions preached was not their own invention or opinion; it was the Word of God itself, delivered through human vessels but carrying the full authority of God. We talked about this several weeks ago when we looked at the Reformed theology that undergirds our church and our denomination. God’s Word is the ultimate authority in all matters of faith and life – not a church leader, a worship liturgy, or anything else. God’s word is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12), and it is through the hearing of this Word that faith comes (Romans 10:17).

Notice the phrase, “which is at work in you believers.” The Word of God is not static; it is dynamic and powerful. When God speaks, things happen. Just as in creation, when God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light, His Word brings new life to believers. This highlights that salvation is by grace through faith alone. It’s God who opens hearts, grants repentance, and

gives the gift of faith. The Thessalonians' response to the gospel shows God's word at work in them, transforming their hearts to receive the truth of Jesus and follow him.

Let's move on to **verses 14-16. Here, Paul shifts to a second theme: the suffering that the Thessalonian believers have endured for the gospel.** They've experienced what other believers in Judea also faced—persecution. Paul commends their faithfulness in the face of such trials, noting that they suffered at the hands of their fellow countrymen, just as the churches in Judea suffered at the hands of the Jews. Paul connects their persecution to a larger pattern of opposition that God's people have faced throughout history: the prophets were persecuted, Jesus was crucified, and the apostles faced opposition. By enduring suffering for Christ, the Thessalonians were following in the footsteps of these faithful witnesses.

What we see is that suffering and hostility is part of the Christian life. Jesus Himself warned His followers in John 15 that they would face persecution. However, this suffering is not without purpose. God, in His sovereignty, uses trials to refine and strengthen our faith. The Thessalonians' perseverance in the midst of suffering was evidence that God's grace was sustaining them. As Paul writes in Romans, "we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope" (Romans 5:3-4).

Moreover, and this is the third point, Paul speaks of God's judgment on those who oppose the gospel and therefore the need to share the gospel with others. He refers to the Jews who killed Jesus and the prophets of old and those who hindered the apostles from preaching to the Gentiles. Paul declares that "wrath has come upon them at last!" This is a sobering reminder that opposition to the gospel is ultimately opposition to God Himself. While God is patient, His justice will not be delayed forever. Those who persist in rejecting the gospel and opposing Him and His work will face His righteous judgment.

This warning should spur believers, like most of us in the room here are, to urgency in our evangelism. The gospel is not just good advice; it is a matter

of life and death. Those who reject Christ are under God's wrath (John 3:36), and the only way of escape is through faith in Jesus. As evangelical believers, we must proclaim this truth with both clarity and compassion (boldness and gentleness of last week in the previous verses), inviting and calling people to repentance and faith in Christ. **Now, verses 17-20.**

In the final few verses of this passage, we see Paul's deep love and longing for the Thessalonian believers, and the bond of fellowship we have in the church through Jesus. Paul's affection for the Thessalonians is deep. He had been forced to leave them abruptly, but his heart remained with them. He longed to be with them in person, to encourage them and strengthen their faith. However, Paul acknowledges that Satan had hindered him from returning. This is a reminder that we are engaged in spiritual warfare, which is really a further development of the earlier point about hardship and persecution that will come toward Jesus' followers.

Even non-believers will sometimes acknowledge that there are evil forces at hand, and even use Biblical language to describe that. When I was in college my favorite rock band was the Pearl Jam, and on their third album, they have a song called, "Satan's Bed." It's a song about standing up against Satan, not joining in with his schemes and plans and temptations. I went to one of their concerts this last May, and they happened to play that song – they only played it twice out of 32 concerts on the tour. After the song ended, Eddie Vedder, the lead singer, and who wrote the song, and who is not a Christian as far as is publicly known...he made the comment that "Satan's not on our side." I gave a loud "Amen" to that. So, here I was at a secular music concert with some 17,000 other people, hearing a song and a couple-sentence sermon on keeping away from Satan.

Satan is not on our side, and you don't need to be a Christian to acknowledge that. Now, we Christians would take it a step further and say that Satan is actively working to oppose the spread of the gospel and to hinder the work of the church, and to lead people away from Jesus. But Paul's confidence is not shaken by this opposition. He knows that God is sovereign and that even Satan's schemes cannot thwart God's ultimate plan. And the point is that

Satan can't keep Paul from loving the people of the church. His affection runs deep. There's a deep bond of fellowship.

In fact, his "joy and crown" are the believers themselves. He sees them as the fruit of his labor, the evidence of God's work through him. When Christ returns, Paul's "boasting" will not be in his own accomplishments, but in the Thessalonians, whom he has had the privilege of leading to faith in Christ. This is a beautiful picture of the joy that comes from being involved in the work of the gospel. As Christians, our greatest joy really ought to be seeing others come to faith and grow in their walk with Christ. **This is the essence of discipleship and the mark of a mature Christian: someone who is pouring into the lives of others so that they might know Jesus and love Jesus more.**

Paul's joy in the Thessalonians reflects the deep love that we should have for people who come to faith and then for one another as members of the body of Christ. Our relationships within the church are not merely social; they are spiritual; they are for discipleship, for edifying us in the faith, leading one another toward Jesus, as well as leading others outside the family of faith toward Jesus so they would be part of the church family.

So, again, this passage covers a lot of territory, so let's recap each point, with four personal commitments that come out of each one. Maybe one or two of these will particularly resonate with you as an area of growth: **First, the Word of God is living and active, at work in the hearts of believers.** It is not the word of humankind, but the very Word of God, carrying His authority and power. We must hold fast to the truth of Scripture, the proclamation of Scripture, and trust that God will accomplish His purposes through his word. So, let us then recommit ourselves to the authority of God's Word. In addition to Sunday morning sermons, let's study, know, and apply God's word to our lives. Personal devotions, small groups, classes, Bible Study Fellowship...there are a number of opportunities get into Scripture. It's not just a head knowledge. Transformation starts with the renewing of our minds, but it doesn't stay there: it makes its way into the very fabric of who we are, the everyday moments...so let's then live out what we're learning.

Second, suffering is part of the Christian life, a tool of Satan's to try and derail us, but it is not without purpose that God draws out of it. God uses trials to refine our faith, and we can endure with hope, knowing that His grace is sufficient for us. So, let's recommit to suffering for Jesus! 😊

Ok...we don't need to seek out suffering, but when it comes, when opposition to our faith comes, let's be committed to perseverance in times of trouble and seeking God's presence and leading in those times, as well as the good ones. God works out his purposes for the good of those who love him...and that includes working things out when we're in the dark valleys of life. So, persevere in living out your faith, leaning into Jesus in all seasons of life, including the trials.

Third, there is a judgment coming, and we want to lead others to a relationship with Jesus, who saves us. This is a powerful reminder that our labor in the Lord is not in vain. Every act of service, every word of encouragement, every moment spent leading and discipling others into a new relationship with Jesus...every moment we spend doing that will have eternal significance when Christ returns. So, let's recommit to the mission of sharing the good news with others. We want people who are far from God to be drawn close to him, through faith in Jesus. Let's do what we can to lead others to him.

Finally, Paul reminds us of the deep fellowship and care that exists within the church, as we encourage one another in our discipleship to Jesus. Paul's deep love and longing for the Thessalonians remind us that the church is not just an institution or a building; Lord have mercy if either of those become our primary definition of "church." Rather, the church is a family bound together by faith in Christ. In a culture that's all about individualism and promoting our own personal brand: the church is countercultural. We cherish the fellowship we have in the body of Christ, encouraging one another, building each other up, and laboring together not for our glory, but for the sake of the gospel and the glory of Jesus. So, let's recommit ourselves to the fellowship in the church that is centered on discipleship. Let's lead one another along in our journey of following Jesus.

So, again, kind of a wide-ranging sermon today, because that's where the passage goes. But all of this is ultimately the work of God's grace. What we do is our response to God's grace, his initiative, his work, his Word. It is He who saves, sustains, and sanctifies His people. We are called to respond faithfully, but it is God who gives the growth. We can labor with confidence and joy, knowing that through his Spirit and his Word God is at work in and through us, and that one day, we will see the fruit of our labors when we stand before Christ and enter into his eternal Kingdom. Let's pray... Amen.