

Over the last 2 ½ years or so, we have occasionally explored some of the smaller, and more overlooked letters of the New Testament. 1 Peter, 2 Peter, then first John, then a series called “Five Guys” that looked at five of the smallest NT letters – 2 and 3 John, Philemon, Titus, and Jude; then last fall we went through 1 Thessalonians, and now we are going to walk through 2 Thessalonians over three Sundays.

Now, we might wonder why Paul wrote a second letter to the church in Thessalonica, a city that is in modern-day Turkey. Let me share a story that might help us understand why a second letter was needed. There once was a pastor who preached a sermon to his church that everyone agreed was amazing; then he preached the same sermon the next Sunday. People thought it was odd, but they didn’t say anything – after all, it really was an inspiring and Biblically-rich sermon. Then he preached the same sermon a third Sunday in a row. The elders and some other congregants approached him afterward and asked him about it. “Pastor, we will admit that’s a really good sermon, but it seems like three weeks in a row is a bit much. Can’t you preach something else?” He said, “I will, when the congregation starts doing what I’m preaching!” 😂 Paul might have felt a bit the same.

When you look at 2 Thessalonians compared to his first letter to them, you realize that Paul really doesn’t introduce anything new the second time around. 1st Thessalonians and 2nd Thessalonians are very similar. It’s why I’ve separated these two series by 6 months: you all probably forgot what I preached last fall on the first letter. Since that’s probably true, and since these two letters *are* very similar, this sermon series will take the 8 sermons from 1 Thessalonians and mash them up into three sermons for this series. 😂 Just kidding. So, with that, let’s dive into 2 Thessalonians, beginning with the **first 5 verses**. This is God’s word to you and me this morning...

So, after an opening greeting that is reminiscent of Paul’s other letters, and particularly of the greeting in his first letter to the Thessalonians, **Paul then**

gives some strong words of thanks to them. Even though there are some things that still need correcting in the church, he wants to affirm and bless them for the things that are going well. This is a great model for delivering a corrective message to someone. We are called to “speak the truth in love” and when the truth is a difficult one, the way to help deliver it in a spirit of love is to also affirm and bless the person or people to whom you are speaking. Compliment them about something, and show your appreciation for them, give them a word of encouragement.

Paul acknowledges in verse 3 that he and his companions “ought always to thank God for you” because they have a growing faith, and their love for one another in the church is growing as well. **Sometimes we need others to point out that we have grown.** For instance, a child may not realize he or she is getting taller. The parents or others in the family may not hardly notice it even. But when a relative sees a kid for the first time in a year or something like that, the growth is obvious, and the exclamations of, “Look how much you’ve grown...you’re taller than your parents!” (not that we’ve experienced that in our household)...that kind of affirmation always bring a smile to the child. Frequently, it’s the same in spiritual growth: we may not always see our growth on a day-to-day basis. But the growth is there as God works in us, and as we open ourselves up more and more to his Word, his spirit, his truth, and his grace.

And so, Paul is showing his appreciation for them and their growth in faith and in love for one another. In fact, in his interactions with other churches, Paul boasts about their perseverance in the face of trials and persecutions. What a great way to encourage them: to let them know that *they* are an encouragement to other believers beyond their own community of faith and beyond their own city. It undoubtedly put a smile on their faces to read this, and encouraged them.

Then verse 5 gives a final word of encouragement: that their faith and love are “evidence” of God’s judgment. So often we think of God’s judgment as a negative thing – like the persecution and trials that they are facing. And to be fair some people say that’s what Paul is referring to here. But more likely it is their faith and love, perhaps especially in the face of the

persecutions and trials. **The growth of this love and faith, is “evidence of God’s judgment,” because it demonstrates that they are “counted worthy” in the kingdom of God.** In other words, the result of God’s activity in their life – which although he doesn’t say this here, it certainly starts with the proclamation of Christ crucified and resurrected and their reception of that message –the proof of God’s activity in their life is their faith and love.

Paul is saying that through their perseverance and growth in faith and love amid suffering, they are being shown to be, or declared to be, worthy **of** God's kingdom. This “faith and love evidence” is the outward manifestation of a status God is confirming in them. And so that is God’s judgment: that they are worthy of the kingdom of God, not because of what they’ve done but because of what Jesus Christ has done and their response to the gospel message. Let’s continue on, where we see the other side of God’s judgment in **verses 6-10...**

So: Verses 6-10 articulate, and mostly focus on, the *other* side of judgment, the kind of thing we mostly think of when we think of God’s judgment: A negative response to, or even punishment for, how people live or behave. This judgment is for those who cause troubles for Jesus’ disciples as Paul writes in verse 6; and it’s for those who do not know God and don’t “obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” as he puts it in verse 8. For them, there will be “everlasting destruction” and they will be “shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.” This will happen when Jesus returns as he says in verse 7.

Now, this kind of teaching is rooted in what Jesus himself says. This is not just Paul. This is not just the early Church. This is not just church history and teaching since then. A lot of people have it in their heads that God’s judgment of sin and the consequences of sin is all concocted by Christians. How often have you heard someone say, “Jesus was about love. Christianity is only about love. How can you say something is wrong or bad? How can you say this, that, or the other thing is a sin, and that there’s a negative consequence for it? How dare you Christians say that?” as if Christians invented the idea. The thing is, Christians didn’t invent it: Jesus did.

Actually, it starts before him, going into the Old Testament even. There has always been judgment for sin – from pride to sexual sin to greed to murder and on it goes, including denying the existence of God our Father and Creator. Genesis, chapter 3: Adam and Eve suffered consequences for their sin. Now for sure, a lot of Christians have not handled their reaction to other people's sins well. Frequently there's an air of pride and judgmentalism that is conveyed, rather than humility and recognizing that we're all sinners in the same boat in need of God's saving grace. Unfortunately, Christians don't have a reputation for communicating the gospel to non-believers with humility. But there is judgment for sin, regardless.

Jesus himself teaches judgment and eternal consequences – both positive and negative ones. He teaches this in parables like the parable of the sheep and the goats or the parable about Lazarus (not to be confused with Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha), or the parable of the wedding banquet, among others; or in end-times teaching that doesn't use parables, like in Matthew 24 where he uses similar language that we read in today's passage; and then in other passages that are well-known even outside of the church such as John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life." The unspoken opposite side of that famous verse is that those who *don't* believe in him *do* perish and have everlasting death. **In fact, in John 3:18, Jesus says, "...whoever does not believe stands condemned."** Don't believe in Jesus? Then by his own word, you're condemned. So, Paul's teaching in today's passage that those who *don't* trust and follow Jesus experience "everlasting destruction and are shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might" is rooted in Jesus' own teaching.

By the way, some people say, "How can a good and loving God have such eternal and dire consequences? That's not very loving of God to do that." Actually, it is. **If someone doesn't want any part of Jesus in this life, why would God force them to be with him in eternity?** When Gwen and I first met, we became close friends as ski and mountain bike buddies and other outdoors stuff. I wanted our relationship to go to another level and date her once I'd known her for a few...minutes. But she didn't. It took her 10 months to get there. But I couldn't force that to happen. If I had made her

date me...if I had said, “I love you...you have to love me back” that would have been abusive and repelled her. And that’s not at all loving on my part. Now, eventually, God softened her heart toward me. But I couldn’t force her to love me and be with me. And God doesn’t force us to love him and be with him, either. He’s given us free will...He hasn’t created us as robots, because robots can’t give or receive love and because we’re created in God’s image. Instead, in his sovereignty God invites us to receive his love and to freely love him back. Then it’s actually a relationship built on love, not some coerced imitation of love. So, if someone doesn’t want that love and that relationship, he’s not going to force himself on anyone – be it in this life, or in the life to come. It wouldn’t be loving to do that.

So: All of these verses up until now are connected to God’s judgment: the positive judgment of those who are worthy because of Jesus and their trusting in Jesus, and the judgment of those who are *not* worthy because of their lack of trusting in him. The only difference between the two is confession of sin and trusting in Jesus. Letting go of pride, and humbly acknowledging our need for Jesus. And the whole reason Paul goes into this is to remind the Thessalonians that God’s judgment for the unjust *is* coming...it will be in God’s timing at Jesus’ return and the final judgment of all people...and in spite of the trial and persecution they are facing God *is* with them and they *are* still counted as worthy. Their trials and persecutions are not a sign that God has left them, but just the opposite: their faith and love in the face of these trials demonstrates their dependence on Jesus, and demonstrates that they are counted as worthy. Then Paul continues with a final word of encouragement in **verses 11 and 12...**

We see here again this word, “worthy”. It’s the same root word – kataxio, though a slightly different grammatical form of the word. But the same root word. And so: **Paul tells them that he and his ministry companions pray that God would make them worthy of God’s calling.** In other words, they pray that God would strengthen them for ministry in light of the persecution and tests they’re facing, so that they would represent Jesus well. He wants them to live out their faith well, and it is God who gives them the strength and the endurance to do that. The fruit then, is that the name of the Lord Jesus would be glorified in them, and they in him – meaning, that Jesus

would be made known and people directed to him, and that they, the Thessalonian Christians would be known as disciples of Jesus and encouraged in that discipleship.

So: The main thing Paul is seeking to do in these verses is encourage the believers and remind them of the sovereignty of God. He's got this. He's with them. He's strengthening them and encouraging them and they are worthy even if they don't always feel like it. And while the temptation may be to lash out at those who inflict the trials, Paul is reminding them that God will handle that. There will be consequences to our response to Jesus, handed out by God and in his timing.

And: There's a hidden invitation here, and it's an invitation to follow Jesus...To receive the gift of him and his love. He's not going to force you to receive his love, but he invites you to do so. Knowing Jesus as Lord and Savior of your life is how you are made worthy for the kingdom of God. Jesus is the way to eternal life. Jesus will grow your faith, Jesus will grow your love, Jesus will lead you into the eternal Kingdom of God. There will be obstacles along the way. Jesus had plenty of obstacles, and we should expect nothing less as his disciples. But God will lead us through them, strengthening us for them, so that we can flourish for Jesus and glorify the name of Jesus.

So, keep following Jesus if you already are; and if you're not yet a disciple of Jesus, the invitation is always there to start following. But for those of you who are: keep living with a growing faith and a growing love for people. Keep glorifying Jesus and pointing the way to Jesus where you live, work, and play, so that others would be drawn to him. You are worthy for the task. You are worthy of the calling. You and I are worthy for that because of God's work in your life. So, keep living for him, and glorifying the name of Jesus. Sometimes, I feel like that's the same message I preach over and over, not just three Sundays in a row...but every Sunday. We need to hear that encouragement. Or, at least, I do. I'm really just preaching to myself, and you all get to listen in. We ought to have a mirror out here so I can preach to myself better! The point is: we need to be to keep living into the faith and love we have, because it demonstrates we are counted worthy, even as God

continues to make us worthy for his cause. So, let's live for him, glorifying the name of Jesus in all we say and all we do, because he is definitely worthy. Let's pray...Amen.