

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10  
Church 201: Practicing Faith, Love and Hope  
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We all need an atta-boy or an atta-girl from time to time. There is nothing like getting a handwritten letter of encouragement, right? Having someone take the time to sit down, think of you, and write something encouraging and then send it to you. Am I right? I have a file in my desk – it's the thickest of all – and in it are all the letters I've received in my ministry. Let me tell you, reading and rereading these is like getting a fresh breath of life.

This week, I was reading about two high school students who noticed a deficiency of this in their own lives, but not in the way you'd expect. It's not that Samatha Busch and Jessica Sprong were lacking in encouragement, it's that they realized there were so many people around them who were. So they started a website called the [lettersproject.org](http://lettersproject.org). There people could sign up, be vetted, and then connected with someone, young or old, hospital or homebound, to whom they could write.

The power of a personal thought, word, or touch has the power not only to lift our spirits and change the course of our day, but as we see from reading the New Testament, letters have the power to transform lives and set us on a new course.

If you were here last week, we looked at a man by the name of Paul, who wrote letters to the new Christian Communities around the Mediterranean. Last week, we saw that he did so to provide the church in Rome with some measure of instruction in the Christian Faith. But there were other reasons for his letters, as well. Paul wrote to encourage and fill in the gaps for them.

We are the people who are living in the wake of the resurrection. We live in the hope of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. So to make it, we need encouragement, we need that good word that tells us to keep going in our faith, don't lose hope. And that's what Paul does for the church in Thessalonica.

With that, I'd like to invite you to grab a copy of Scripture, either the pew Bible in front of you or the copy you've brought with you, or look at the screens on either side, and turn with me to the book of 1 Thessalonians chapter 1. And I invite you to read along with me as we hear a word of encouragement from Paul to a church...perhaps not unlike this one.

**Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.**

**We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in**

**word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.**

Paul is writing to a church he founded a few months earlier, but was forced to leave under threats of violence. He was anxious about his new community and wondered if they were still ok. So he sent his friend Timothy to check in on them. Timothy came back with a great report, and that led to the writing of this letter. And one of the things that is happening is that people are talking about this church.

When churches get talked about or written about in the media, on television, or in the news, it's usually because something scandalous is going on. People, it seems, love to hear about and see church leaders who have failures of one kind or another. But that's not Paul's reason for writing. You see, Paul has heard good things, how the people there were receiving the message joyfully, loving one another well, and sharing that grace and mercy with those outside their walls openly. The Thessalonians were a model church, and news was spreading.

The news that was spreading and that reached back to Paul is what we read in verse 9, that the Thessalonians were welcoming to others and were turning to God from idols. If you look at Thessalonica on a map, not only would you discover that it is on a major trade route over land and sea, but you would also see that it was the largest city in Macedonia. So there were many, many people there who worshipped all sorts of non-gods.

Now, we read this and maybe we roll our eyes and think – idols, why would people be so naïve to bow down and worship things that aren't really God? We might think to ourselves that's strange. Is *American Idol* still on? How about *So You Think You Can Dance*? The truth is, we live in a culture that is obsessed with admiring and even worshipping all sorts of non-god things. What was going on in Thessalonica was not so different than our day today, which is why when people see this community gathering to love and care for one another in Jesus' name, it was kind of different. They turned to God, not to get something from God, but to serve and worship him. He wasn't their co-pilot, Jesus wasn't their boyfriend, he wasn't their cosmic GPS. No, the people in the region were talking about the Thessalonians because they were willing to serve God with their entire life in a very pluralistic culture.

The second thing that made this community so remarkable has to do with their geographical setting. If you look at a map, you will see that Thessalonica is centrally

located in the midst of Asia, Achaia, and Macedonia. Then do you see that line that goes through Thessalonica? That is the road that connects Rome to the East and Asia. So any commerce that was going east-west would take this road. It's called the Via Egnatia. Then do you see that Thessalonica is located on a body of water? That's the Aegean Sea, and the port on which it set was the very best shipping port of the area. And what country is below them and to the west? Egypt, so Thessalonica had prime access to Egypt, as well.

Why do I tell you this? After all, you didn't come for a geography lesson. The point is that not only are the Thessalonians receiving the message and living it before others, but they are also uniquely positioned to be a church that can have influence on the wider culture. Jesus was taking root in their heart, the Holy Spirit was strengthening and building them up, maybe for the very reason that they are in a place where they can be used for special purposes.

How has God uniquely positioned you to be a person of influence in your job, in your family, in your neighborhood? How has God uniquely positioned Wabash Presbyterian to be a community of influence in Wabash? Some of you are thinking, "You don't know my family, or my workplace, Cornell. It's chaos, they're psychotic, or, I am a little fish in a big, big pond." But I say, every one of you has been given some measure of influence in your life, and it's up to us to ask, "Where is God calling me to be a person of influence?"

Paul is excited about this church and encouraging to this church because they were in the center of it all. They were...where things are, and the gospel was being proclaimed among them.

And this is the next crucial point: Paul is so pleased with the Thessalonians because the gospel had come to them and was living among them. Paul doesn't applaud this church because they were able to get people to turn from their idols by arguing them into submission, or presenting the most compelling argument for the Christian faith. No, Paul says that the people left their idols because the gospel proclaimed among the Thessalonians was taking root.

This good news can have profound and transformative power – when a person hears that their life, their hopes, their fears, their brokenness, their gifts are all wrapped up and cared for by God's loving grace and mercy. When this message is heard, people's lives change.

But there is a very important distinction to be made here. You see in verse 5 that Paul says that the gospel came not only in word. Has anyone ever known of a church or a community where the gospel was communicated in word only? Maybe they made the distinction that they were a Bible-believing church. A place where they knew all the Christian answers, but their conduct was not Christian, a place where the way they looked and sounded on Sunday was a lot different than how they did other days of the week. Communities that are built around word only are those that talk a good talk, but they're not walking the walk.

Paul says that what made the Thessalonians so transformative in the region was that they were formed by the word, and in power. Now stop thinking about those communities where it's word only. But now think, have you ever encountered a community where the gospel came in power? Where the words that were spoken carried weight and power, because the Holy Spirit accompanied them, the Holy Spirit that blows like a mighty wind, that is palpable and you can feel it moving? Have you ever encountered a community where the gospel comes with full conviction? If you haven't, it is what you were meant to experience.

Communities where the gospel comes in power through the Holy Spirit and in full conviction are places where blind eyes are able to see; in communities where the gospel comes in power and in full conviction, prisoners are set free; when the gospel comes in power, bars that hold people in addiction, or shame, or some sort of abusive situation are shattered and people go free; when the gospel comes in power, the lame are finally able to stand up and walk, the oppressed are released, the hopeless are filled with hope and the lost ones are found. When the gospel comes in power and in full conviction, a husband who is mean and cruel to his wife and children is cut to the heart and realizes that his words and actions hurt, and he turns around and realizes the gift he has and then treasures his family. When the gospel comes in power, in the Holy Spirit, and in full conviction, kids no longer pretend not to believe in God to escape the ridicules of others, but rather stand up to others in their school in kindness and in love, and others take notice. When the gospel comes to communities in power and in the Holy Spirit with full conviction people who are without hope suddenly find that life is absolutely full of hope, because Jesus is now the central figure in their life.

This is what happens when the gospel comes, and that is what God means for us to have. Now knowing that this will not always be great. For some, they were filled with the gospel and it got them killed. But how do we get this as a community? Paul says three things, and these three are Paul's signature teaching and admonishment in nearly all his letters. We will be filled with the gospel and its full power and conviction if, look at verse 3, we have faith, love and hope. If we continue to work out our faith, we labor on in love, and we remain steadfast in hope. Faith, love and hope – this is the ground in which the Spirit enables the gospel to grow and flourish and bloom into a beautiful life in Christ. Amen.