



RESOUNDING FAITH | CREATING COMMUNITY

September 15, 2024

This past week we relaunched our Community Groups and our Bible Studies, and I'm very happy to report that we have 225 people signed up so far for our Community Groups, including close to 60 people serving as leaders and hosts. We had nearly 50 people attend our Men's and Women's Bible Studies this past week, and it's not too late to get involved. Our women's mid-morning Thursday Bible Study with childcare kicks off for the first time this week as well. And let me tell you why this is so important.

The Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow once observed that an increasing number of people identify themselves as being spiritual but not religious. Perhaps you've heard that phrase before. Maybe you would even use that to describe yourself — spiritual but not religious. And as a result, he refers to many contemporary people today as “tinkerers” when it comes to spirituality. You can think of Tinkertoys. People tend to piece together their thoughts about religion and spirituality from a variety of different sources. And if you're a tinkerer, you don't really think that you need organized religion or a church community because you've essentially adopted a do-it-yourself approach to spirituality. So what should we make of this?

Well, if God was merely asking us to give intellectual assent to his existence, I would agree, you don't need a church community to do that. But God isn't merely calling us to believe certain things to be true, but actually to live our life a certain way. He's calling us not simply to give assent to his existence but to center our life on him, to love him with all of our heart and mind and soul and strength. And so Christianity is not merely an extracurricular activity that we try to squeeze into our already overly scheduled lives, but rather it's the hub of the wheel around which everything else revolves.

So the fact is, the Christian life is far too challenging and it's far too counterintuitive for us to live out on our own. All kinds of studies have shown that it's the people in your life that shape the way you think and act and feel. You really are the company you keep. It's the people you spend time with, it's the people that you talk to who form you into the person you are, and so you'll never become the person that God wants you to be on your own. You can only become the person that God has called you to be in community with others. And the good news is that the gospel creates an utterly unique kind of community.

Background

Now we have recently begun a new series focused on the first letter of the Apostle Paul to the Thessalonians. This is a letter that was written in the middle of the first century to a fledgling church that at this point may have only been a few months old. And the central theme of this letter, from beginning to end, is the power of the gospel to revolutionize our individual and our corporate lives. When we place the gospel of

Jesus in the center of our life or in the heart of a community, it unleashes the power of God. The Gospel *transforms our lives, creates a unique community, and catalyzes a mission.*

So last week we noted that Paul traveled to the large seaport town of Thessalonica that was located 200 miles north of Athens. And this was a city that was filled with people from a variety of different perspectives, and quite unexpectedly, some people from a Jewish background, and even more people from a pagan Greek background, received Paul and his companions, and they embraced the message of the gospel despite the opposition that they faced.

It was so surprising that word began to spread, and people heard from hundreds of miles around to the north and the south of this remarkable story about how these Thessalonians had embraced the gospel of Jesus for themselves. And so the key verse comes in verse 8, where Paul says,

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.

And the idea is that our faith is supposed to make a sound. Our faith is not supposed to remain silent. Our faith is supposed to sound forth. It's supposed to resound. It's supposed to echo and reverberate among the people around us, pointing others to the reality of the living and true God who has made himself known in the person of Jesus.

So last week, we focused on how the gospel transforms our lives, but today I'd like us to focus on how the gospel creates a unique kind of community. And the first thing I want you to note is that unlike many of Paul's other letters in which he mentions specific individuals by name in that particular city or place, in I Thessalonians, Paul doesn't mention a single person from Thessalonica, which just underscores the point that this letter was not written to individuals, it was written to a community of people. It was written to a brand new church. And so as we read it today, we have to remember that this letter isn't written to you; this letter is written to us. This letter is written to all of us. But how does the gospel create a unique kind of community?

Well, it's a unique community because Jesus gives you a new identity, a new responsibility and a new destiny, and he gives that to us together. This comes out in particular in verses 9 and 10 where Paul relays the report that he's heard in terms of what's happened among the Thessalonians. And this report provides us with a succinct and yet comprehensive summary of what it means to be a Christian and to be a Christian community. And you can boil it all down to the three main verbs in this statement: *turn*, *serve*, and *wait*. The Thessalonians *turn* from idols to *serve* the living and true God and to *wait* for his son, Jesus. So what I'd like us to do, based on these three verbs, is consider how the gospel produces this new kind of community, because Jesus gives us 1) *a new identity*, 2) *a new responsibility*, and 3) *a new destiny*.

⁸For 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. ⁹For 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, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

¹For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain. ²But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict. ³For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, ⁴but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.

A New Identity

First, let's consider how Jesus gives us a new identity. Paul recounts that the Thessalonians turned from idols. And that word "turn" is a near technical term for Christian conversion, and it means just what it says. If you were driving down a highway and you soon discovered that you were headed into oncoming traffic because you were on the wrong side of the highway, what's the best thing for you to do? Well, you should immediately stop, turn around, and head in the opposite direction. And you see, that's what happened in Thessalonica. The Thessalonians were living in a world that was awash with pagan gods. That's the only world they knew. And yet they did away with all that, they made a decisive break with the past, and they turned from idols to God.

When I was a senior in college, I came into New York to interview for a position at an investment firm as a sales analyst, and I met with a woman who supervised all the analysts. She was a lifelong New Yorker, pretty tough person, and she immediately sits me down in her office and starts firing away with questions, most of which were rather unconventional. The first question she asked me — and I'm not kidding — was, "Do you love money?" And I said, "Well, I think money's important, makes the world go round, certainly better than a barter system, but no, I don't think I love money in the way that you're thinking." And that's probably not the answer she was anticipating. So then the second question she asked me was, "Well, can you sell? This is a sales job. I need to know if you can sell." I was only a senior in college, I hadn't really sold anything, but I explained that I had recently convinced a few of my classmates to join me on the trip over winter break to Rwanda, Africa, with World Vision, six years after the genocide. And she said, "Jason, that's not selling." I said, "I know. Well, I thought it was worth a shot."

Obviously, the interview was not going very well. So then she asked me a third question. She asked, "Are you wild and crazy?" She could probably tell that I wasn't. She said, "Around here, we like to work hard, play hard. Remember that old Saturday Night Live skit with Steve Martin and Dan Aykroyd, two wild and crazy guys? Are you wild and crazy like that?" I said, "Well, I have a good sense of humor, but no, I'm probably not wild and crazy." So then she asked me one final question, which was, "Who's your idol?" And at that point, she was probably hoping I would say Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, maybe Gordon Gekko. I thought to myself, "I should say Jesus." I chickened out, but I figured, "Mother Teresa's maybe not a bad option." I

had recently read a book by Mother Teresa in preparation for this trip to Rwanda. So I say “Mother Teresa. Mother Teresa is my idol.” And at this point, she stands up and flies out of her office, leaving me sitting behind her desk, not sure if I’m supposed to stay or go but quite sure I bombed this interview. I was left there scratching my head. “How is Mother Teresa offensive? I thought she was the safe choice.” But a few minutes later, she comes back into her office, and she’s got a book by Mother Teresa in her hands. She said, “I just gave this book to a woman down the hall this morning. Mother Teresa’s my idol, too.” And she gave me the job on the spot. That’s how I landed my first job after school.

But I want to return to that final question she asked, “Who’s your idol?” It’s a good question, isn’t it? The question essentially is, “Who do you aspire to be? Where are you trying to find meaning and purpose in your life? What are you really living for?” Because everybody has to live for something in order to provide their life with a sense of meaning or purpose. The New City Catechism, which was written by Tim Keller, defines idolatry as “trusting in created things rather than the Creator for our hope and happiness and our significance and our security.” Idolatry is trusting in created things rather than the Creator for our hope and happiness, significance and security.

Now for the Thessalonians, their idolatry was obvious because they had a god for everything. They had a god of the land and a god of the sea, a god of love and a god of war, a god of power and a god of prosperity, a god of fertility and a god of pleasure, a god of fame and fortune. They had a god for everything. And our idols may be less obvious, but they are no less real, because everybody trusts in someone or something to fill our lives with significance and security, to assure us that we matter and to assure us that we’re going to be okay, no matter what life might throw at us. So you see, deep down, all of us experience a kind of angst. It might look different for different people, but we all experience a kind of angst, and we’re willing to do anything to get rid of it. I don’t feel valuable; I need money. I don’t feel loved; I need sex. I don’t feel strong; I need power. I don’t feel important; I need recognition. I don’t feel seen; I need status. I don’t feel safe; I need control.

Our idols may be less obvious, but they are no less real. We may not bow down to metal images, but we certainly bow down to the mental images in our mind of our conception of the good life, and we’re willing to do almost anything to achieve that vision of the good life. That vision directs all of our thoughts and our actions, all of our hopes and our dreams, and it ultimately controls and enslaves us. But when God calls us to himself through the gospel, he basically says to us, “You are significant and you are secure because you belong to me.” Therefore the gospel gives us a new identity. Now, finally, for the first time, you really know who you are. You know that you’re safe because you belong to him, now and forever.

The problem with any idol, of course, whether ancient or modern, is that Idols aren’t real, and therefore they’re powerless. They can’t actually do anything to help you. The Thessalonians were living in a pre-Christian culture, and everything in their culture predisposed them to reject the message of the gospel. And yet, some of the Thessalonians began to see through their idols in order to embrace the message of Jesus because they realize that dead, fake gods have nothing in comparison to the true, living God who’s made himself known in the person of Jesus.

What about us? We're living in a post-Christian culture. But the thing that these two cultures have in common is that everything in our culture also predisposes us to reject the message of the gospel. Yet it seems to me that people in our day are also starting to see through our idols, because they realize that the things that we look to for our hope and happiness, our significance and security, don't ultimately provide us with what they promise. And the reason why I think that is because that's what many of you are saying to me as I'm talking with you. Many of you are telling me that you might have been looking to build a meaningful life by pursuing certain avenues, but the ways in which you thought this life might come to you are not quite panning out the way that you expected. And so lots of people say that we live in a secular age, but as I'm talking to people in New York, it seems to me that there's light at the end of the secularization tunnel. Because, as people go through a secularization process in places like New York and come out on the other side, there tends to be a new openness, a new curiosity, not just toward spirituality but toward Jesus in particular, precisely because their idols have failed.

A New Responsibility

So first, we see that the gospel gives us a new identity when we turn from idols to the living and true God. But that's not all. Jesus also places a new responsibility upon us, because Jesus doesn't merely call us to follow him as isolated individuals but rather to form a community of people who are committed to loving and serving him together. And verse 9 makes that clear. Paul says that the Thessalonians *turned* from idols to *serve* the living and true God. And what an interesting word choice. What it shows is that Bob Dylan got it right when he said, "You gotta serve somebody." So it's ultimately not a question of whether you will serve someone or something, but rather who or what will you serve in order to find your significance and security? One very good reason to serve the living and true God is because he's the only one who gives and gives rather than takes and takes the more that you submit and give yourself to him.

But that takes work. None of this comes naturally. None of this comes easily. And I love the way that Paul opens up this letter. If you've got a Bible in front of you, you could look earlier in the chapter to verse 2, because there Paul says that He gives thanks always for the Thessalonians, constantly remembering them in his prayers. And in particular, he specifically remembers three essential characteristics: 1) their work of faith, 2) their labor of love and 3) their steadfast hope.

Now do you hear that: faith, love, hope? That's a famous triad that appears over and over again in the New Testament scriptures to varying degrees of clarity, but this might be one of the very first places where Paul writes about faith, hope, and love, because this was one of the earliest, if not the very first letter that Paul ever wrote. And what do faith, hope, and love tell us? John Calvin once said that faith, hope, and love sum up the very essence of Christianity. This is what it means to be a Christian community, because every Christian is a believer, a lover, and a hoper. But all of this requires effort. When Paul speaks of faith, he's not saying that you just passively either have it or you don't. Love for Paul is not wishy-washy. Hope is not mere optimistic thinking that things will turn out alright in the end. Rather there's teeth to faith, love, and hope. *Faith works, love labors, and hope endures*. And that's the

responsibility that is placed upon us, not only as individuals, but as a community. So let's look at each of these three characteristics in turn.

Faith Works

First of all, faith works. Think about what the apostle Paul writes in Philippians 2:12-13. He says,

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Now notice Paul is not saying work *for* your salvation. No, our salvation is a gift of God's grace. There's nothing that we could do to earn it, to achieve it, to win it for ourselves. We can only receive it. So he doesn't say work *for* your salvation, but he does say work *out* your salvation. In other words, you have to work out the implications of what it means. You have to think it through. You have to put it into practice. And that's why you need community. You can't do that on your own. The gospel will never be fully learned or experienced except in community with others. We need trusting relationships with one another in which we give people permission to speak the truth in love into our lives, to help point out our blind spots, to help us see ourselves for who we really are, and to give us the advice and counsel that we so desperately need in order to learn to follow Jesus with passion and integrity. I need that. You need that. We all need that.

Love Labors

So faith works, but secondly, love labors. Just like physical labor, loving others is hard work. It's not mere sentimental talk. Now last week, we held our training for Community Group leaders, and we took a little time to "define the win." How do you know if your Community Group is functioning the way that it should? What does a win look like? And so we took time to define the win, and one of the surprising and sort of counterintuitive things that we shared with the Community Group leaders is that if your Community Group is functioning the way that it should, you should expect it to be messy.

Why is that? Well, if the group is functioning the way that we intend the groups to, it means that we're inviting people to come as they are, to bring their full authentic selves into community with others, which means we want people to come with their faith and their doubt, their joy and their sorrows, their hopes and their fears, their strengths and their weaknesses, their gifts and their graces, as well as all their quirks. And if that's true, well then there will be times when we may let down our guard. We might share a raw, unvarnished thought. We might honestly express something we think or feel or believe, and it might be awkward. It might get messy. It could be complicated. There may be times where we do or say something intentionally or unintentionally that's embarrassing or perhaps even hurtful. But you see, if we're serious about building relationships, then we have to prepare ourselves for the fact that things might get messy sometimes. That's what makes it real.

When I'm providing premarital counseling to couples that are getting ready to get married, I will often say that you don't have a real relationship with another person until you've learned how to talk things through and then resolve a conflict. Sometimes

couples will tell me — perhaps almost as a point of pride — that they never fight. Whenever a couple tells me that they never fight, I know that one of two things must be true: 1) They're lying, or 2) They're not actually close enough to experience friction with one another. But you see, real relationships, real friendships are strong enough and close enough that you might actually hurt or offend one another. You're close enough so that you're going to experience friction, and yet those relationships are deep enough that you know how to talk things through and work things out together.

So real love takes work. Love labors. That's true in marriage, it's true in friendship, and of course it's true in the church. Therefore we shouldn't be surprised at times if, in our groups, things get complicated. But we can take comfort from the fact that God uses conflict in our lives. God's not afraid of conflict. God uses conflict in our lives, often to hold up a mirror to ourselves, to help us see ourselves for who we really are, so that we can change. So then, rather than running away from the complexity of our relationships, we have to bring our relationships to Jesus, the one who promises to forgive us and the one who promises to restore us. So things might get messy, but love labors.

Hope Endures

Then finally, hope endures. Notice that each of these characteristics is outward facing. Each of these characteristics pulls us out of ourselves. Faith lifts you up in a relationship with God. Love draws you into community with other people, and hope propels you out toward the future, toward the new future that God has promised for all of us together. But as John Stott points out in his commentary on I Thessalonians, hope is not the same thing as optimism. Optimism is often a matter of temperament or personality. Some people are just more optimistic by nature. They just assume things will somehow, someday turn out alright in the end. Optimism is a matter of temperament, but not hope. No, hope is a matter of theology. Christians are people of hope. Why? Because we know how the story ends. We know that God will fulfill all of his promises in and through the person of Jesus. Therefore hope fills us with patient endurance. No matter what our present circumstances may be, it fills us with patient endurance, even in the face of adversity and opposition.

Paul exemplifies that kind of hope in the first four verses of chapter 2. There, he reminds the Thessalonians what they already know about how Paul and his companions had already suffered and had been shamefully mistreated when they went to Philippi. And yet despite the fact that they knew that when they went to the neighboring city of Thessalonica, they likewise would meet with the same kind of mistreatment when they brought the message of the gospel, it didn't stop them — because of their hope. So even in the face of adversity and opposition, they moved forward, and they came to Thessalonica to share the message of the gospel with them despite the opposition that they might face. Their willingness to suffer publicly for the sake of the gospel underscores the point that they weren't operating out of ulterior motives. They ultimately were not trying to please people. They were seeking to please God.

That's what hope does. Real Christian hope — a settled assurance that God will fulfill his promises in the end — is what gives us the courage, the strength, the resilience

to press on, even in the face of difficulties, because we know that Jesus will return to finish what he started.

A New Destiny

That brings me then to my third point, which is that the gospel creates a unique kind of community. Because, first, Jesus gives us a new identity. Secondly, he gives us a new responsibility. But thirdly, he gives us a new destiny. Turn, serve, wait. The Thessalonians turn 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.

We're called to wait. It's probably not the word that you would have expected Paul to use to describe our destiny, but we're supposed to wait for his Son. Now on the one hand, this word "wait" offers a bit of a corrective, because we don't have the power to fulfill God's purposes. We can't bring the Kingdom of God on earth. So the New Testament nowhere tells Christians to bring the Kingdom, to build the Kingdom, or to advance the Kingdom. Rather, we're called to wait for the Kingdom of God. We're called to seek the city that is to come. We don't climb our way up to heaven. We don't create heaven on earth. But rather, we wait for that day laid out for us in the final chapters of Revelation, when Jesus brings the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city, the future that he's promised, down from heaven to earth to renew all things. So we can't create heaven on Earth; we have to wait for God's son from heaven to do the work. He was the one who was raised from the dead, and he's the one who will come to deliver us from the wrath against all sin and evil and to usher in a whole new creation.

But on the other hand, this waiting is not meant to be passive. We are called to wait in a very active sense. I love the way that the apostle Paul puts this at the end of his famous chapter on the resurrection in I Corinthians 15. He elaborates at great length on the meaning and the significance of Jesus' resurrection from the dead and the promise that we too will one day be resurrected with new resurrected bodies to enjoy the new future world that God has promised. And at the end of this chapter, in which he just beautifully lays out the mystery of the resurrection, Paul doesn't conclude by saying, "So just sit back, relax, twiddle your thumbs until Jesus returns and finishes the work." No, he ends this chapter in verse 58 by saying,

Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

So you see, we're not called to wait in a passive sense; we're called to wait in an active sense. We're not supposed to just sit there; we're supposed to do something. We're supposed to wait by anticipating the future that God has promised through our actions now. I love the way that N.T. Wright once put this. He says we can't build the Kingdom of God, but we can build *for* the Kingdom of God. We're called to anticipate that promised future through our words, our actions, our relationships now, because that's how God intends to provide the watching world around us with a glimpse. It may be only a glimpse. It may be a partial glimpse, it may be a marred glimpse, but it is a real picture, nonetheless, of what God intends to do when he makes all things new. And therefore, everything we do now in service to Jesus matters. Everything counts. Nothing will be lost. Nothing will be wasted. This is our way of simply putting our prayer into action. "Thy will be done, thy Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven."

This is how N.T. Wright describes this active waiting:

"What you do in the Lord is not in vain. You are not oiling the wheels of a machine that's about to roll over a cliff. You are not restoring a great painting that's shortly going to be thrown on the fire. You are not planting roses in a garden that's about to be dug up for a building site. You are – strange though it may seem, almost as hard to believe as the resurrection itself – accomplishing something that will become in due course part of God's new world.

Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or to walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support, for one's fellow human beings and for that matter one's fellow nonhuman creatures;

and of course every prayer, all Spirit-led teaching, every deed that spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honored in the world – all of this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make.

That is the logic of the mission of God. God's recreation of his wonderful world, which began with the resurrection of Jesus and continues mysteriously as God's people live in the risen Christ and in the power of his Spirit, means that what we do in Christ and by the Spirit in the present is not wasted. It will last all the way into God's new world. In fact, it will be enhanced there."

So the gospel creates a unique kind of community, because Jesus gives us a new identity, a new responsibility, and a new destiny, and it's all yours for the taking. Or perhaps it would be better to say it's all *ours* for the taking, together.

Let me pray for us.

Father, we pray that just as those living in Thessalonica turned from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his Son, Jesus, from heaven, so help us to do the same. And we pray that you would help us to live into the promise of what you intend for us as a community of people, and give us the grace we need to be a place where faith works, where love labors, and where hope endures for the good of your name. And it's in the strong and powerful name of Jesus that we pray. Amen.