

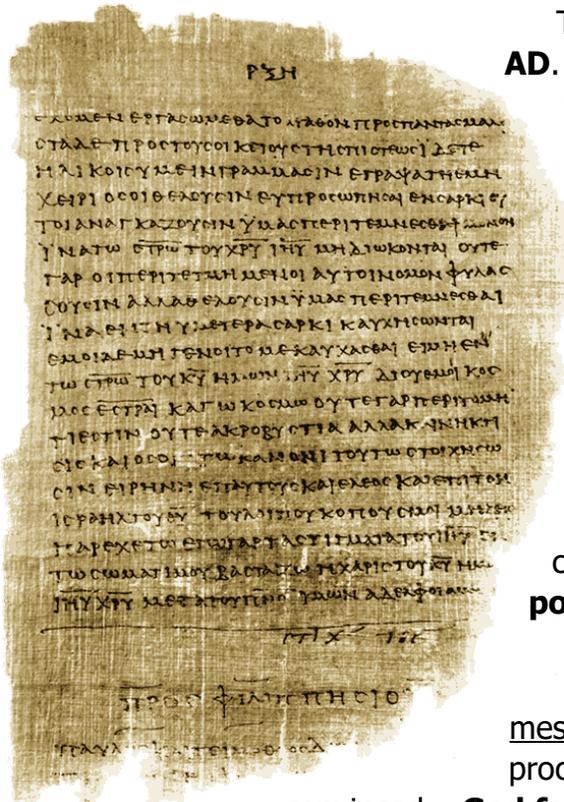
July 11, 2021

Message: "Don't Give Up" Pastor Pam Rossmiller

This passage from I Thessalonians calls us to be light in the darkness – the same message that our youth shared with us last Sunday. Whether the **darkness is "dusk" or pitch black – be Light**. This letter to the Thessalonians was the first one we have of Paul's writings – and right here in this 5-chapter letter we **read powerful guidance** on how to become people of the Light against all odds.

Last Sunday night, our air conditioner died at home. I don't know if you remember the weather about a week ago – but it wasn't pretty. Anyway, that bad boy had been working for us since 1978 – 43 years – it had a good run. But – now decision time. Turns out it was a condenser. But you all know how it is when you are trying to figure out replacement or fix. You look at reviews. Who to do the work? What appliance or company to go with? Many good reviews but no one is perfect.

Paul is giving us a **Christian disciple review** of his Thessalonian friends – and although he knows that the Thessalonians are not perfect – this letter reads like they are definitely **5\* faithful** in the Christian living department.



This letter penned by Paul was written in **50 AD**. Mark's gospel – the earliest of the gospels was written 20 years later (**AD 70**). Paul is writing to 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians. Everything written were letters, outside the gospels. This first letter to the Thessalonians would be about equal to **2 typed sheets of 8 X 11 paper**. It would take about 10 or 15 minutes to read.

Paul had been **traveling and preaching**. He was in Antioch, then Galatia, on to Ephesus and then to Thessalonica. He traveled on an ancient roadway, and stopped at **main traffic areas** to help to start a church community – especially in a **harbor or port city**.

In Acts 17:1-4 (read) it says that **Greeks came to the synagogue**, drawn to the message of the Hebrew bible. Paul had taught – proclaimed that Jesus had come. Some were

convinced – **God fearers, God-worshippers**, even **prominent women**. These were the folks that Paul was writing to. But beginning in verse 5 (read 5-7), we read that the people were driven out of the synagogue. The Jews became jealous because others were drawn to Paul's teaching. They formed a mob, even went to **Jason's** house where a small group had been meeting. Christians were saying that there is another king – besides Caesar – **King Jesus**. And it didn't go well.

But the handful of people drawn to Paul's teaching, stayed true to Jesus and formed a church. Paul leaves and ends up **in Corinth** where he writes this letter. He is worried about them holding fast to the faith – he knows what these Jews were like. He sends Timothy to go back to **Thessalonica and encourage them**.

When Timothy comes back, Paul can't believe what he hears. A **report of courage and faith**. A **witness for Jesus**. As I read this first chapter – it made me think of the youth who led worship last week. Oh sure ... 2-ice cream stops, and a candy store is not persecution ... but the trip was not an easy one.

Our first afternoon at the Cedarville campus – when everyone was getting oriented and finding their way around – I had gotten word that my cousin, who has no family (never married) was on life-support in a Columbus, OH hospital. As I checked my mapquest – I saw that I was only 51 minutes away. I knew that God was calling me to go. Adam stepped right up and went to the meetings for pastors, LoriAnne said she would watch over the youth – just go. After a very sweet and comforting hug from Katie Slife – I jumped in the 15-passenger van and took off with my cell phone guiding the way. As the next of kin, I was able to help make end of life decisions and *amazed and humbled by God's grace*, I could tell him his family and friends loved him. He passed away while I was there. I followed up with the chaplain and coroner and then praised God all the way back to the kids. I returned to the campus with some time to spare before our first night's worship. There I received love and care from each of the Grace youth in one way or another. I am the **Timothy to report back** to all of you - we have 5\* Christian youth here at Grace. I was blessed by them.

I have only words of gratitude – to a God who could have orchestrated a reunion at my cousin's end of life – but I also give testimony to the **faithfulness of the youth** that you all have raised up in your midst. So, I can relate to Paul's excitement.

In Paul's letter the word faithful occurs 6 times – **faithful means trustworthy, someone you can count on**. The Thessalonian church was full of faith and refused to give up in the face of criticism. This is the main message in chapters 1 and 2.

He spoke of their *work – that came from faith*.

He praised their *effort that came from love*.

And he writes of their *perseverance that came from hope in Jesus*.

What Paul writes to them, helps us to know what might have been going on – and **gives us words of wisdom for today**.

The word back to Paul was that people couldn't stop talking about the Christians who refused to give up, despite persecution. They **shared their faith** even when **living out faith was dangerous**. I heard from so many people this past week, those watching last week's service online ... how impressed they were with our young people's witness. The strength of their faith was clear – God sent the light of the world to save us from our sins. Jesus came - lived died and was resurrected for us. Nothing can separate us from the love of God." Brian Flaherty went on to say (and he spoke for the team) that Christians often **confuse difference with darkness**. We were

encouraged to **fight to unite**. I have pondered those words this week. I wrote them in my prayer journal ... *don't confuse difference with darkness*.

It is in chapter 2 that you get a feel for what Paul saw as the persecution that the church was enduring. Paul writes in verse 3, "**Our appeal isn't based on false information, the wrong motives, or deception.**" Is this what the critics were saying about Paul – about the small church made up of extraordinary Christians in Thessalonica? The **critics** wanted people to think that Paul's message was based on lies. That he was manipulative. That Paul was tricking people. A **greedy man seeking praise**. This afternoon – read chapter 2. Paul had **trained to be a rabbi** – then trained to be a tentmaker. He **moonlighted** as a tentmaker while he was preaching and teaching. I am not advocating pushing yourself to the margins – overworking so that you are a wack-a-doodle. But **Laziness** – (defined as disinclined to activity or exertion) is one of the 7-deadly sins. Leaving a job or room or apartment better than you found it is a witness for your faith. **Working hard** – or doing your best in your circumstances – so that – if possible – you don't become dependent on someone else – that is **faithful**. Paul wasn't trying to please people – but please God. But "boy" were the people of that day trying to **discredit his work and message of Jesus**.

Just because you work hard, do your best, begin and end your day seeking Jesus doesn't mean you will **never be on the hot plate of criticism**. We are all unfairly **criticized at one point in our lives**. We will face unfair and unwelcomed harassment. For some, because of their **faith, or the stand they take** – or the people on the margins they held up for – they can be bullied or shunned. We can be **picked on or teased**, our character can be ripped on, harmful social media posts can appear – some part of it happens to all of us at some point in our life. It can be **very discouraging**. This I Thessalonian letter, gives us some help in learning how to deal with criticism.

Let's face it, unless we are perfect, **criticism will come**. **Don't give up!** On one hand, it can be **constructive**. Sure, it is hard at first for our defenses not to go up. But once, you realize that there is a way to receive criticism, in **order to grow** – to be a **better pastor**, a **better parent**, a better **co-worker**, a better **musician or teacher** or **athlete or grandma** ... to **grow as a disciple** – then you see that criticism can help your growing edges and you might find it is a gift.

Sometimes it comes as **hurtful and is almost always uncomfortable**. Feedback requires a skill to be delivered well. Not everyone has that skill. But if your attitude is "help me to see the things I need to see," it helps to receive the words as helpful – useful. Honestly, when you stop receiving criticism – you stop growing.

Possible responses: *I am sorry, I didn't know that I hurt you. I apologize or thank you for helping me hear how this affected you. Or, I want to reflect on this and pray about it – I am glad that you feel that I am a safe person to speak openly to. Help me learn how to do it better.* There is always an area to improve as a friend, a

neighbor, an air conditioner installer or as a Christian. **Proverbs 15:1** says, “**A gentle answer turns away wrath.**”

But this is **not what Paul is talking about.** The people delivering this criticism are trying to stop the people from following Jesus – **sabotage the holy work** of Christians. Because they didn’t like the good they saw in the Christians that they didn’t see in themselves. The old, “I’m going to put you down to feel better about myself.”

Sometimes when others are critical, we feel like giving up. **Don’t give up.** In this last year, people had a lot to say. Opinions fall along conservative, centrist, progressive lines, setting protocols for covid – masks or no masks – someone is always unsettled. Let’s just say that there is plenty of criticism to deliver – people have a lot of thoughts.

Some folks would avoid criticism by saying nothing, doing nothing, and being nothing – but that is no way to live. If Paul had said **“I quit, this is the end of my Christian faith,”** so much teaching would be lost. Sometimes you have to do the right thing, in the Spirit and stand firm. Been there? Have you had to **say the thing** that would go against the grain? Stand up for justice, or against racism or for the rights of the LBGTQ community – or for the good of Black Lives Matter? **Don’t give up** – keep doing and saying what God is giving you to deliver.

Everyone loved **George Washington** until he became president. The headlines in the years that he was president were filled with disdain. They ridiculed him. **Abraham Lincoln** was hated by the south, democrats, republicans and ultimately assassinated. In the **Lincoln - Douglas** debates – Douglas said that Lincoln was a 2-face. His response, “If I really had 2-faces, do you think I would wear this one?” *Humor goes a long way.* Lincoln also acknowledged that he could be wrong, he was trying to do the best he could in the moment – and knew that history would judge him.

I Peter 3:9 says, **“Don’t pay back evil for evil or insult for insult. Instead, give blessings in return.”** That hard thing to do in the middle of criticism, but it speaks volumes about your faith. It takes some practice to feel hurt or shame – and respond with kindness to someone else’s unkindness. **Moses** – they tried to kill him over bad food. **Elijah** – the king and queen wanted to kill him and he was so down he wanted to take his own life. **Parents** – we can be the meanest people in the world to our children. **Spouses,** sometimes, because you love her or him so most – it is up to you to say the hard thing. With **co-workers or church friends, or students** – there are times that someone just might come back to you (years later) and say **“I thought you were so mean – so hard on me, but it turns out what you did for me ended up to be the kindest thing – in the long run.”**

**John Wesley** – people threw rocks at him when his sermon ran long after a 3-day rummage sale. They threw a sack of manure on his head. They lit his father’s house on fire. A major newspaper lampooned him in the headlines. **Dr. King, Mother Teresa, Billy Graham** – not conservative enough, they had the nerve to integrate

blacks and whites, one even welcomed Catholics. All saints and leading figures have criticism. People are critical.

Paul found the Thessalonian church faithful – **unbelievably faithful**. How will the city of Rockford find Grace Church? How did the rummage sale shoppers speak of us this week? When your family visits and comes to worship – what will they say? Paul writes to the Thessalonian Christians and says, **“Don’t give up.” Blessed are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, all because of me.”**

Don’t give up. Ask yourself, “How can I be better?” Use the places that you have fallen short to perfect you and make you into the people God wants you to be. Say to yourself, “I will not let this person steal my joy or keep me from growing as a person.” I intend to make a difference in the world and live for Jesus. When the Holy Spirit says “speak”, I will not be silent.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen