

People of the Light: 2. Faithful: Living a life Pleasing to God

1 Thessalonians 3:6-13; 4:9-12

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Pastor Bethany Nelson

Over the last month, we've been unpacking and creating our home. Happily, the only boxes that remain are those empty and ready to pass along to someone else. So we've reached that next step, of being unpacked- but now needing to *live* in our home, and allow us to discover the precise place and rhythm for our days. Some things, I'm sure are set up just right. I love the flow of our living room- with space to relax and read or watch tv, and another space for play... the boys action figures already sprawled out from daily play. Other areas, like our kitchen- are unpacked, but not yet settled. We've got to settle in and find our working routine to figure out if we've guessed correctly on how to fill each drawer and cupboard. But this is the joy of making a home, isn't it? Discovering how best to use spaces that enhance the ease and joy of living.

Some of the last pieces to make their way out of their boxes were our artwork and photographs. And a few of these, I'm rather sentimental about. I've got framed photo collage from each of our boys birth. A print from one of our favorite places in key west, and a large canvas with our wedding vows. This, hangs in our bedroom- and serves as a daily reminder of the promises we made, first many years ago.... But now, embodied and lived out every day. I love having it hung in a place where I see it each day- a constant reminder of our promises to be faithful to each other and to God's call to love our neighbors. Most days, it's an affirmation of how we live and center our life as a couple and family. But some days, it serves as encouragement, a gentle reminder when I may be feeling less than patient. But always, it is a reminder of a love that produces faithfulness, trust, and kind actions. The vows Luke and I exchanged, are the same ones my parents shared 40 years ago. So in many ways, my entire life has been blanketed by these promises. Promises to speak and to listen. To encourage and be encouraged. To give and to receive. And to make our partnership one grounded in a desire to love each other and our communities. These vows are, in this way, words that shape our life together. They bring focus to *how* our light shines. I hope that most days it shines brightly, but also trust- that even a candle flickering in the darkness produces a noticeable glow. And so, I give thanks even for the days with that glow.

Throughout our series this month, we're listening to the ways Paul encouraged the people of Thessalonica to let their own light shine... to be a people who embody their faith in such a way that it too, produces a noticeable glow. One key to this, says Paul, is living faithfully. And as you've heard, Paul mentions faithfulness no less than 5 times in this chapter alone. From the surface- being faithful means to be committed honestly, without deviation or lies. To do and say what you say you'll say and do. But more deeply- being faithful thru the lens of faith means: keeping hope in God's promises, living united as one body of Christ, keeping our focus outward and using our own unique gifts to live into the lives God has called us into. And to do all of this, even when it's difficult. Being faithful is about *keeping hope* amid challenging circumstances. Paul and his community knew something about these challenges.... for their faith, they were being persecuted, isolated, and set apart from their communities. It was a daily struggle to *keep the faith*. And yet, as Paul writes – he knows that they have remained strong and faithful. They have continued to love God, to care for each other, and to hold fast to with hope to the promises they know in Christ.

Now, my boys are at the age where their imaginative play is at its height. What I see as a pile of blankets or pillows, is their Everest. When I see a cardboard box, they see a plane, or a cabin, or a robot. Or sometimes all three at once. Earlier this week, I watched them play – fighting invisible forces of evil that surrounded them in our living room. They were held in at all sides. The boys stood at attention, their play swords high and ready for battle. At first, their enemy threatened to divide them – *each man for themselves*, they could have declared. But instead, they gathered, backs to each other providing a wall of protection as each of them fought together, united. Their plan worked, and they won the battle. As I watched them, so happily and enthusiastically playing together – I thought, how lucky am I, that my boys first reaction, in the midst of a challenge, is to unite and work together? They know somehow, intrinsically, that they are stronger as three, than one.

I think this is the same feeling of joy and pride Paul must have felt when he wrote these words: *But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought us the good news of your faith and love. He has told us*

also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, just as we long to see you. For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you through your faith. For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?

How can we thank God enough for you for all the joy we feel because of you? Paul is encouraging them, and us, to be united when times are challenging. Reminding us that part of being faithful, is seeing ourselves not as one person, but as part of the whole body of Christ. Culturally, this can be a bit challenging, as we live in a time that celebrates individuality. We're taught to "pull ourselves up by our bootstraps," to work hard, to listen to our own needs and desires- and place *self* above all else. One of the residuals of the enlightenment era is that each of us are taught to discern our own path, our personal goals, and work endlessly towards them.

One way we see this lived out is in the way we identify personal goals. What are, or have been, major goals in your life? For most of us – they center around education or careers, possibly lists of places to travel, or ideals of a dream home. But rarely, do our life goals include things like: decreasing our own carbon footprint, or investing in the local elementary school, or working to end injustices around us.

But Paul, in his understanding of Jesus, calls us to live another way. Being faithful, is less about our individual selves... and more about our community. Both those we choose for ourselves, like our church or friends or families we've built- but also the communities we are given: the place we live, the families we've been born to. And, in our increasingly connected world, Jesus calls us to be faithful to *all* of humanity. Paul reminds us, that Christ calls us to turn our attention outward. Living in such a way, that our light shines not only on our own path, but illumines the way for others. It's not always easy, but it *is* faithful.

Throughout scripture we're given examples of this. Even from the beginning, God did not create us in isolation. Instead, God created us to birth, nurture and care for others. Instead, time and again, we fail to live into this God's way of life. There's a story in Genesis 11 where after the flood, the people were fearful of God's command to spread out around the world. Instead, they came together and said "let us build a tower to the heavens, to make a name for us". We know this as the Tower of Babel. If the rainbow was God's promised sign to the people, this tower would be the people's own sign in the sky. A symbol, they hoped, of their own successes. But God had other plans, and as a reminder to the people to be faithful to the way of life God called them – God caused their languages to be confused and scattered the people around the earth.

Later in scripture, in the Gospel of Luke – Jesus is asked: what must we do to have eternal life? Which might as well be the question – *how do we live faithfully?* Jesus says: love the lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself. Then, he tells a story, that you may remember from Sunday School: *A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was attacked by robbers. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him.*

Who lived faithfully, they asked? Jesus said: the one who showed mercy. Go and do likewise. Being faithful is always the action of turning ourselves outward, making goals not for our individual selves, but being grounded in our love of God and neighbor. Or as Paul says to us today: *"May our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you."* - 1 Thessalonians 3:11-12

Like some of you, I found my way into Methodist churches as an adult, and was not raised in its churches or systems. My path to the United Methodist Church was a long one – but once here, it was also a little like a homecoming. I found a community of people who welcomed me with open arms, into a place I wasn't even aware I was looking for. There are a few reasons I've fallen in love with the people called Methodist, but one of them, is our **connectional** beliefs and practices. That is, while we recognize we are individual people and churches, we place a high value on the way that we are stronger together. We are one body of Christ, united

across our congregations, conferences and world. We believe that if one part of the body is hurting, we all hurt. If one part of the body rejoices, we all celebrate that, too. We've found strength in being part of something bigger than ourselves, committing ourselves to turning outward and being faithful to each other... Trusting that seeing ourselves in community, rather than solely single bodies on a journey, will in fact, draw us nearer to Christ. And I think this is the same encouragement Paul gives the church: *May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.*

Paul's words encourage the people that their way forward, will be together, as one people and one body of Christ. The light of our individual self melts and is strengthened by the glow of our community- all of our small lights come together to increase our witness and impact. This is, and will be, the sign of our faithfulness. And it is also, our hope. Because Jesus promises to bring peace and security to our lives, not thru military force – as the people of Thessalonica are experiencing against them... but through love, *in and thru* the people. And just as God has protected their people throughout history – God will protect them now. Not reigning as a far away god that dwells on the mountain peak, as the gods of their neighbors, but as one who lives among them. Calling us together, calling us in love, and calling us – to be visible signs of God's hope to one another. Shining brightly and illuminating a path for others to follow.

Nadia Bolz-Weber is a Lutheran pastor, writer, and leader in the modern church. She planted a church in Colorado, that found its identity in being a place for people who didn't seem to belong elsewhere. But here, people from all walks of life found a church home. There were tattooed hipsters and recovering addicts. Folks experiencing homelessness, gay teens, and young parents. This church shined a light into shadows of their community, where folks who felt left behind or hidden, were brought into the light. Welcomed home, and given a place to be celebrated for their own uniqueness. I heard her tell a story once, when an unexpected couple came to visit. They were clearly "not from here" and didn't fit in... their nails manicured, their khakis and polos perfectly pressed, her purse matching exactly the colors in her Sunday best dress. Pastor Nadia reflected and thought, *these two could find a home in any church. What are they doing here?* And as she worried that the popularity of her congregation would change who they are, she paused. God's presence upon her as a reminder that welcoming all, means all. Even those you don't expect. It an experience of being challenged that looks a little different than most churches, but at its core – the question is the same: what does it mean to live faithfully? How do we stand together, caring for one another, seeing all as God's children? This church of misfits was challenged to extend their reach, and so too, are we.

How is it that your faithfulness helps the body of Christ grow and be strengthened?

A few weeks ago, I told you one part of my call story. I told you about a few people critical to my own faithfulness to God's presence in my life. But there are others. Even some, I bet, that I can't name or remember. But one more, that I do. Pastor Jennifer Koenig. She was my supervisor when I worked at St Olaf. Pastor Jennifer was a wise and faithful woman. She stood tall, with grace. Her words and prayers spoken with an artful beauty, you could tell in her voice that she was an artist. A dancer. Because her prayers danced throughout the sanctuary, pulling you in, closer to God. She also seemed to be a person that was not easily frazzled. Her kids sat, sometimes quietly, sometimes mischievously as young children do, in the front row. And though I found them adorable, I sometimes wondered how she could carry on, undistracted. But she did. I could tell she found a deep delight in her kids. And deep joy in work as a pastor. And she taught me, more than anyone else, how to live fully into these two callings God had placed on her life, and I knew was placed also on mine. The first time I watched her baptize a baby – she held that little one with a joy as if they were her own. She bounced and swayed, the ways mothers do. She smiled tenderly. And prayed over this baby, with a fierce faithfulness and trust that God was present. And when that baby began cry, and make their own voice known... Jennifer paused. She patted her little butt, shushed her softly, and smiled again. *We're in no rush*, she seemed to say, *you are safe, beloved child.* It was the most beautiful baptism I'd ever witnessed. And I'm equally sure that for Jennifer, it did not seem out of the ordinary. Because for her, it was simply her way of faithfully embodying every piece and gift God had given. She gave me the courage and know-how to live fully as myself *and* fully as God calls me to be. Because, God does not call us to live or follow *apart* from who God made us to

be. Instead, living faithfully for *you*. For *me*.

It's about living *fully* into the person God joyfully knit together. Your nerdy interests or passions? Your love of numbers or technology? Your creative skills of sewing or gardening. Whatever it is – embracing *you*, every beautiful piece, is how you will best live faithfully and most brightly shine your light into the world. At the end of the reading we heard today, Paul said: *indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters of Macedonia. But we urge you, to do so more and more.* What does it look like to love more and more? To live in such a way that your confidence in Christ shines brightly upon the path before you, and invites others in to enjoy its glow?

I want to encourage you to be a risk taker for Christ. To *risk* loving yourself and living fully as the one God made... Knowing that as you do, you will take up your unique role in the body of Christ, to make an impact in the life of someone else.

My husband, Luke, has a couple key interests in his life: Renaissance Festival (for which he is thrilled we are now so close!), movies, and working out. Intersecting a few of these, was a story we heard about last month, about John Cena. Now, John Cena is a professional and world-champion wrestler and actor. You won't likely find him in any award winning movies, but he's often the muscle or some comedic relief. But he's also used his star power for some good and unique ways – he's often visited kids through Make A Wish, meeting them often in hospitals. In 2018, he won an award for his philanthropy, after "granting" over 580 wishes – more than anyone else in the history of the program. As we're talking about using your unique gifts to shine your light brightly, and faithfully, into the world. John Cena, maybe surprisingly, is one who does just that. And last month, I heard a story about a kid – a refugee from Ukraine with down syndrome, whose Mom promised him, that if only they would leave their home, he could go to a safe place and meet his hero, Cena. Of course, this Mom never expected it would happen – but like any parent, she said what she could to encourage her child through an impossible situation. But to her surprise, Cena heard their story and responded. What does it mean to live faithfully? It's about embracing our gifts, living with love, and shining our light outward for all to see... And when we do? As John Cena said, "it'll be pretty darn special".

Friends, what opportunities are present in your life to make special your impact on those around you? When we dare to open ourselves up to living, not as individuals, but as one part of the body of Christ, we will find ourselves living faithfully to God, upholding their command, and our mission here at Messiah to: grow disciples of Jesus by loving God, loving each other and loving the world.

Let us pray:

Faithful and loving God, we give thanks for the ways you daily show up in our lives to encourage, inspire and draw us nearer to you. We hear you calling us to lives of faithfulness, and we want to please you. Give us courage to embrace our gifts, be united as one body, and shine our lights for all to see. Make us a people who shine brightly the light of your goodness and grace. In the name of your Son, our Savior, Brother, and Lord we pray: Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of July 31

Prayer for the Week

Ever-living God, as we gather this day be with us. Show us your ways and guide our steps. Draw us nearer to you, that we grow in faithfulness each day. Make us to hear and embody your good news, that our entire lives are lived in service and love of you and neighbor. Help, encourage and call us, Ever-living Christ. Increase our faithfulness that we joyfully live your message of love. In the name of Jesus, our Savior, Brother and Lord, Amen.

Monday, August 1

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 3:1-5

So when we couldn't stand it any longer, we thought it was a good idea to stay on in Athens by ourselves, and we sent you Timothy, who is our brother and God's coworker in the good news about Christ. We sent him to

strengthen and encourage you in your faithfulness. We didn't want any of you to be shaken by these problems. You know very well that we were meant to go through this. In fact, when we were with you, we kept on predicting that we were going to face problems exactly like what happened, as you know. That's why I sent Timothy to find out about your faithfulness when I couldn't stand it anymore. I was worried that the tempter might have tempted you so that our work would have been a waste of time.

Observation

The apostle Paul compared his love for the Christians in Thessalonica to that of a nursing mother (1 Thessalonians 2:7) as well as a loving father (1 Thessalonians 2:11). Having faced first-hand the kind of violence the message of Jesus aroused, he felt concern like a good parent about whether their faith could withstand those pressures. A form of the word faithfulness appears five times in this chapter alone (1 Thessalonians 3:2, 5, 6, 7, 10).

Application

When Paul sent Timothy to Thessalonica, that meant Paul had to "stay on in Athens by ourselves." Paul did not have a large "entourage" of supportive friends and co-workers. Sending Timothy required the selfless choice to stay alone in a strange, potentially hostile city. In what ways can you give up some of your personal comfort or convenience to bless another person or group of people?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, I want to be faithful, and I want to help others I care about be faithful. Please guide me to be effective in both of those activities. Amen.

Tuesday, August 2

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 3:6-10

Now Timothy has returned to us from you and has given us good news about your faithfulness and love! He says that you always have good memories about us and that you want to see us as much as we want to see you. Because of this, brothers and sisters, we were encouraged in all our distress and trouble through your faithfulness. For now we are alive if you are standing your ground in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you, given all the joy we have because of you before our God? Night and day, we pray more than ever to see all of you in person and to complete whatever you still need for your faith.

Observation

To realize the depth of the apostle's gratitude here, imagine the world in his day. He sent Timothy off to Thessalonica. Not only was there no way for Timothy to text or phone him ("Arrived safely—preaching for church this weekend"), there wasn't even speedy public mail service. All he could do was wait (and pray) for months for Timothy's return. Timothy's report was indeed good news; the word Paul uses is the same as the word for preaching the gospel.

Application

Paul's link to the Thessalonians was deeply personal. Timothy brought not only good news about the Christians' faithfulness; Paul said it was also about their "love." Why could the Thessalonians accept and value Timothy's visit as a sign of Paul's love for them? What can this teach us, as members of a church with nearly a thousand members, about the pastors and congregational care team who extend the church's love to us?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, teach me more and more how to value all the people and activities through which you extend your love to me. Keep me growing my faith every day toward completeness. Amen.

Wednesday, August 3

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus guide us on our way back to you. May the Lord cause you to increase and enrich your love for each other and for everyone in the same way as we also love you. May the love cause your hearts to be strengthened, to be blameless in holiness before our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his people. Amen.

Observation

When the apostle Paul wrote (or dictated) this letter, he did not pause after the word “Amen” and say, “Chapter 4.” The chapter divisions commonly used today were developed by Stephen Langton, an Archbishop of Canterbury. Langton put the modern chapter divisions into place in around A.D. 1227. When Paul prayed for God’s love that is “blameless in holiness,” he was likely preparing the way for the counsel he’d give in chapter 4 about pure and impure ways to express physical love.

Application

In verse 11, Paul gave us a valuable model of prayer. This was not about a big, complex issue. He just hoped to be able to soon plan and make a trip from Corinth to Thessalonica. He could have said to himself, “I can handle that.” Instead, he prayed for God to guide him on his way back to the Christians he loved in that city. In what ordinary day-to-day tasks do you remember to ask God to guide you?

Prayer

Lord God, in one short prayer Paul asked you to guide his current travel plans and to keep his people holy to stand blameless before you at the end of time. Remind me to include all my life in my prayers, too. Amen.

Thursday, August 4

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 4:1-4

So then, brothers and sisters, we ask and encourage you in the Lord Jesus to keep living the way you already are and even do better in how you live and please God—just as you learned from us. You know the instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. God’s will is that your lives are dedicated to him. This means that you stay away from sexual immorality and learn how to control your own body in a pure and respectable way.

Observation

“God’s will is that your lives are dedicated to him.” What a lovely, spiritual sentiment. “This means that you stay away from sexual immorality.” Hold on, Paul! You’re going to spoil this lovely moment by talking about sex? Yes, he was. If we needed any reminding that human nature hasn’t changed much in the last 2,000 years, the subject-matter of this chapter should provide it.

Application

The Thessalonians found a world of unbridled self-gratification on their doorsteps, the world to which until recently they had themselves belonged. For people raised in the Greco-Roman culture, learning “how to control your own body in a pure and respectable way” was a new idea, not something they just assumed had any connection with serving God. In what ways is our culture different from that? In what ways is it similar?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you created us with desires. Yet you made us able to direct those potent feelings and urges in ways that serve love, not self-gratification. Whatever my stage or station in life, help me find that pathway. Amen.

Friday, August 5

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 4:5-8

Don't be controlled by your sexual urges like the Gentiles who don't know God. No one should mistreat or take advantage of their brother or sister in this issue. The Lord punishes people for all these things, as we told you before and sternly warned you. God didn't call us to be immoral but to be dedicated to him. Therefore, whoever rejects these instructions isn't rejecting a human authority. They are rejecting God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

Observation

In verse 5, the apostle Paul dealt with sexual urges in a way similar to his (and Jesus') teaching about money: do not make it your god by letting it control you. Verse 6 dealt with another real issue in his day that has resurfaced strongly in ours: the idea that sexual acts apart from committed love are victimless. But to sexually mistreat or take advantage of anyone is to ignore God, who values and respects all God's children.

Application

Later, to Christians in Corinth (a city even Romans mocked for its immorality), Paul wrote that your body is "a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you." As he did to the Thessalonians, he urged them forcefully, "Avoid sexual immorality!" Have you ever thought or said, "It's my body—I can do what I want with it"? How did Paul's teaching that "God didn't call us to be immoral" challenge that way of thinking?

Prayer

Dear Jesus, make all of me – body, mind and heart – a temple where your Spirit dwells. Reshape me from the inside out in your beautiful holy image. Amen.

Saturday, August 6

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

You don't need us to write about loving your brothers and sisters because God has already taught you to love each other. In fact, you are doing loving deeds for all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. Now we encourage you, brothers and sisters, to do so even more. Aim to live quietly, mind your own business, and earn your own living, just as I told you. That way you'll behave appropriately toward outsiders, and you won't be in need.

Observation

The apostle's words about "loving your brothers and sisters" followed his teaching about sexual ethics, and moved to a different but equally practical focus on love's meaning. Verse 10 was the key to Paul's message. His point was that money can express love, and if the love is genuine it will find an outlet in financial generosity. This is not always clear, because in a literal translation verse 9 simply speaks of 'love of the family' and of 'love'. But love is more than feelings and emotions. It guides our actions in the Christian community, and in the world outside. In short, financial generosity is one way God has taught us to love.

Application

Paul saw believers as a family, not just an organization. This love is found in the close ties within the spiritual family of God. This love is possible for Christians because the ultimate example of Christ himself is infinite. In what ways are you included in God's "family," not just a church organization? How can you extend that to other family members you may not yet know?

Prayer

Loving God, thank you for inviting me into your love-filled family. And thank you for calling me to actively invite and include others in this eternally enduring family connection. Amen.