January 14/15, 2023

Imitation, Influence & Impact

A People of Hope Series

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Pastor Josh Luse

Every single one of us wants to live a life that makes an impact on this world, don't we? We want our lives to matter. We want to do something significant. We want to live in such a way that at some point after we're gone, there's still an imprint left. But isn't it so interesting that though we long to live lives that leave an impact, we often forget or lose sight of that in the day to day, the week to week, the hour to hour. But what if there was a way that we could shape our days and shape our weeks and shape our lives, so that it would leave an imprint on this world long after we're gone? So, we want to talk a little bit about that today and we're starting a new series in the book of First Thessalonians. But before we get there, it's probably helpful if we take a step back and look at how this church was formed, and the early parts of its infancy.

Actually, back in Acts chapter 16, we find that Paul is going on a second missionary journey. One night he has a dream. He has a vision that there's this man from Macedonia, calling out to him to come and help. And so the next morning, Paul sets out to head to Macedonia, and he gets to Philippi. He starts to share the gospel, and it actually brings up an uproar and lands him in prison. Listen to what they say in Acts chapter 16, from verses 20 and 21:

> **… "These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans."**
>
> (*NASB, Acts 16:20-21)

Now this is going to be key for our text today. So keep that in mind as we continue to travel forward into our study. Paul, actually in prison, has the opportunity to share the gospel with the jailer, and the jailer and his whole family come to know Christ. And from there he goes to the city of Thessaloniki, or we would say Thessalonica. He travels just slightly down the Greece coast, traveling west and south and comes to a landmass that kind of has what looks like three fingers, and there's this coastal town there. And as Paul goes in, he does what he typically does. He starts to go into the synagogue and share the gospel. He does that for three weeks. And as he shares the gospel, some Jews become believers, several Greeks, and it also says some leading women choose to trust and follow Christ. But other Jews become jealous. In fact, those Jews, in Acts chapter 17, verse 5 say this:

> **But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the marketplace, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar;** (*Acts 17:5)

These wicked men that come along from the marketplace to join in this riot, and if you are reading the Old King James Version, it would refer to them as ***lewd fellows of the baser sort.*** I think that's a good description for these guys. So, these not-nice guys start to create a riot and wreak havoc on the city, so the Christians—the new believers in this town—usher Paul and Silas and Timothy away in the dead of night, and they head to Berea. As we look further in chapter 17:

> **Now these people were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily *to see* whether these things were so.** (Acts 17:11)

The Bereans were more noble than those in Thessalonica, because they studied the Word to see if what they were being taught was true. So interesting to me, that if we look through our Bible, our New Testament, we don't find a book of First Berean, do we? But we do find a book of First Thessalonians. Now we are a Berean church; we've come from that. But it's interesting to note that from the beginning of this ragtag group, in the midst of persecution and chaos, emerges this beautiful church, a church that would become a model church to other churches all around the area. But Paul is sitting away from them now and he's worried. He doesn't know what has happened to them. He knows there's severe persecution going about, and he's wondering if all that they've invested and poured into this young church, is forgotten, is long gone. So he sends Timothy, and Timothy goes and gets a report and comes back and shares that with Paul. And that's where we find ourselves now in 1 Thessalonians, chapter 1, verse 1. Paul starts his letter, writing back to this young church and says:

> **Paul, Silvanus,** (which is Silas' proper name) **and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.**
> (*1 Thessalonians 1:1)

Now this is a fairly common organization of a letter structure for the beginning of a letter in the Greco Roman times. They would first state who the author was, then who the recipient was, and then the greeting. But there's a couple of interesting things that we find in this. This letter is most likely the earliest recorded letter that we have of Paul's in our Scripture. And he starts out by saying, **Grace to you and peace** in this greeting. He changes the wording, because Paul's whole life has been changed.

Have you ever received grace from somebody? Doesn't that feel incredible? Usually it comes along with the line of, "*I'll give you grace, but just this once," right?* That's the limit of our human grace. That's it—one time! But Jesus' grace does not end. God's grace is unending. But what's interesting is that at the end of this letter in chapter 5, verse 28, Paul will repeat this greeting again. But he changes it just slightly. Instead of saying, **Grace to you and peace,** He says: ***May* the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with you.**

Grace to You, and ***grace with you.*** Because Jesus has so freely given His grace to us, we can continue to give our grace to others. Now I had a friend in college, and at times he would show up late, or something would happen, and his response would always be, "Grace, Grace, Grace, Grace, Grace, Grace." It's as if he was saying, "I have received more grace than I ever deserved, so I can certainly continue to share my grace to you*."* But there's another interesting thing that it's helpful to note in this greeting. You'll notice at the very beginning, he says, **Paul, Silas, and Timothy,** and then throughout this whole chapter, you're going to see him repeat these words of plurality throughout it. In verse 2, we see "***we" give thanks in "our" prayers*;** in verses 6 and 9 we see him use the word ***us. You also became imitators of "us".*** In fact, if you go look for ***we, our,*** and ***us*** in the first 30 verses, you're going to find those words used 40 times. And far beyond that, they'll stretch out all throughout his letter. It's a unique way of looking at the reality that Paul understood: *the value of a team in leadership.* It was a plurality, and he understood how God works

through community. It's really easy to try and display grace to myself when I'm on an island all alone, isn't it? It's something different to display that when I'm interacting with people.

You ever been on a mission's trip with other strangers or people with you on a team, and after a week or two and cramped conditions, you start to have maybe smells that come up and different things? And you start to really see the true picture of who you are emerge, don't you? Maybe it was a road trip with your family for several days, cramped up in a car. There's a picture of *us***,** our truest *us,* that comes out in those times. But Paul and Silas and Timothy have been so changed, so transformed in their life in Christ that, as they spend time with these people in Thessalonica, they see there's something different about their lives…and that leaves a powerful impact.

That's why Jacob talked yet again today about our Life Groups. Really believing that living in community not only forms and shapes us, but it gives a unique picture to the watching world around us. Verse 2:

> **We always give thanks to God for all of you, making mention *of you* in our prayers;**

Notice where he goes immediately after the greeting in the letter: *gratitude…thanksgiving.* Paul has learned to walk through life every day, whether it be in any circumstance, or in a letter, or with people, to understand his first response is to give *gratitude…thanksgiving.* And who is he thankful for? He's thankful for the people, but he gives the praise to God. He says, **We give thanks** (to who?) **to God** for what is happening in their lives. Paul wants to affirm them. He wants to encourage them, but he understands who the praise goes to. I'm sure it's just because Paul had it easy, right? That's why he could be grateful. I'm sure that living life in the culture of the Roman areas was easy, right? I'm sure his missions' journeys and life as a missionary was easy, right? I'm sure the jail he stayed at in Philippi was cozy. I'm sure politics, Roman politics, were nothing like American politics. I'm sure he had no reason to complain. Instead of complaining, he chooses to be thankful and to give thanks to the one who is deserving. He goes on to talk about the work that had been done in their lives, and what he's grateful for. Verse 3:

> **…constantly keeping in mind your work of faith and labor of love and perseverance of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father.**

And the way this is written, **in the presence of our God and Father,** could be tacked in at the beginning. It's to help us show that Paul is continuing his prayer of thanksgiving to them. So, you could read it this way. It can be read **…in the presence of our God and Father, *we are constantly bearing in mind.*** And then listen to how the NIV translates this: ***Your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.***

Faith…love…hope, we love these words as Christians, don't we? They become an anthem for us. We put them up on our wall as pictures. We have jewelry with them. We put them on a keychain. But these words are meant for something much more than something to display on our walls. They're something to be displayed in our life. Each of these internal qualities is a catalyst for an outward expression. Did you get that? That's key this morning: *Each of these inward qualities is a catalyst for an outward expression.* Look at what Paul pairs each of these with. **Faith, love, hope** - with *work*, or *labor*, or *endurance*. It kind of sounds more like a bootcamp than a Bible verse to me. It's this quality of faith working its way out in our life.

Now you say, “Wait, isn't it clear from Scripture that faith is not given to us by works? What's this faith and works thing?” You're absolutely right. Listen to what Ephesians chapter 2, verse 8 says: ***For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is a gift of God, not a result of works.*** But he doesn't stop there. He goes on in that chapter, in verse 10, and he continues to say that we are created in Christ Jesus **for good works**.

We're not saved by our works. But our faith, because of the salvation that Jesus Christ offers, is meant to be lived out. It's meant to be put into action. Maybe it's helpful to think of it this way, to reverse those words. Something extremely significant can happen in the lives of others and in this world when you have a *faith that works*. Something incredible can take place in the lives of other people around you when you have a *love that labors*. Something amazing is seen by people watching your life *when you have a hope that is steadfast.* It's meant to be acted on; it's meant to be lived out. How your faith is displayed, or not displayed, speaks volumes to the watching world around you. He goes on from faith to love.

I heard a story once about a guy that was trying to win the heart of this girl, but she wouldn't even talk to him. She wouldn't meet him; she wouldn't return his texts. So he decided he was going to go the old school way and start to write letters. And so he did write five, six, seven times a week. He would put a letter in the mail to her, and when he continued not to get a response, he amped it up to three times a day that he was writing a letter and sending it in the mail. Over the course of the entire time, he wrote more than 700 letters to this woman…and she ended up marrying the postman. *(laughter)* Sometimes love doesn't work its way out the way you're thinking.

But this is not a romantic love that Paul is talking about. This is not a friendship. The word that he uses here is *agape*. This is a different kind of love. This is a faithfulness love. This is a committed love, an act of the will. Maybe think of it this way: This is a love that loves those people that are hard to love. Look what he pairs this word with, *a labor of love*. Labor—kopos, this Greek word—means grueling, wearying work involving sweat and toil. It’s difficult work. Imagine the church in Thessalonica facing persecution, having people that don't agree with their view, and yet working to love these people.

I wonder if there's anyone in your life that takes a bit of work to love. Let’s make it a little practical. I'll steal a couple of Denis Waitley’s ideas on how we can love practically. He spells it out using the word love: L-O-V-E. For “L” he said this: “Listening when another is speaking.” How often when somebody else is speaking am I thinking about what I want to say to them, especially when it's somebody that is talking about something I don't agree with? But what if we could love them by listening when another is speaking. “O” was for “Overlooking petty faults and forgiving all failures.” Overlooking petty faults, and not forgiving some? No, forgiving *all* failures. “V” was for “Valuing other people for who they are.” Church, as we walk around throughout the week, we interact and come across people, all created by our God, bearing His image. We walk across people that God loves and has given His life for, so valuing other people for who they are. And “E” was for “Expressing love in a practical way.” It has to become more than a thought, or a good idea. It has to flow out into an action. This is what Paul is talking about when he's talking about a *labor of love.*

He goes on to a *steadfastness of hope*. We think of hope, often in our culture, as wishful thinking, don't we? “I hope I get a good grade, even though I didn't study at all.” “I hope that we win the

game, which is maybe a miracle, right?" "I hope, whatever, fill in the blank." But when the Bible speaks of hope, it's not speaking of it in these terms. It's speaking of hope as surety. It's a done deal. This thing is going to happen. Why? Because a promise is going to be fulfilled by the One who keeps His promise, who will always keep His promise, who cannot break a promise, and who will not break a promise. When Paul speaks of hope, it's a sure thing. What is our hope in? In the Lord Jesus Christ, in who He is, and what He has done, and where He is reigning and that He will return once again. He talks about pairing this hope with steadfastness or endurance. It means to *remain under.*

It gives me this picture in my mind of this mountain climber, climbing in extreme conditions, under the weight of a backpack, remaining under that, with the wind and ice blowing in his face, and every step is a challenge. But he's got his eyes set on the summit, and he will not back down. He's going to move forward because there is the hope of that summit one day. Paul says *to continue in their hope and steadfastness; this love is faith, is hope.* These are all characteristics that come from character, character that's baked into these new believers in Thessalonica. That's not something they did just every now and then. This was something that was the core of who they were. They were a new creation, and God is working that out in and through their lives. He goes on in verse 4 to say:

> **…knowing, brothers *and sisters*, beloved by God, *His* choice of you; for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sakes.** (Vs. 4-5)

Now imagine when the Jewish readers would have heard this, they instantly would have thought of Deuteronomy, chapter 7, verses 7 and 8 and the word **chosen,** right? Those verses say,

"*The LORD did not make you His beloved nor choose you because you were greater in number than any of the peoples, since you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers…"*

When the Jewish people would think of *chosen*, they would think of it exclusively as to their nation. But yet now Paul writes this to the church of Thessalonica, to men, to women, to Jews, to Gentiles, *all chosen by God*. God has chosen you before you chose Him. The truth is this. He chose you and He pursues you, and yet somehow, He invites you and me to follow Him. It's one of the great mysteries that is there. Ephesians chapter 1 says, "*Before the foundations of the world, God had already chosen you,"* and yet somehow, He gives us the ability to accept or reject Him. My mind can't put it all together, I can't come to understand how that all works. But this is what I know. Election is not a doctrine to be analyzed. It's a truth to be adored: that the God of the universe has pursued and chosen and loves you.

And what they are speaking of in verse 5, they flesh that out as our God gospel. Whose gospel? Not Paul and Silas and Timothy's; it's Jesus' gospel, but they're sharing it in first person. They're not just sharing the story of another person. This has so saturated their lives, they longed to speak it. And when they do, it comes out with **power**, and with the **conviction** of steel. They believe it with all of their being. In fact, he says, "We spoke to you **not in word only**, (Take note that the gospel doesn't need to come in word only) but their word came powerfully. It wasn't just their

words said, **but also in power**—*dunamis*. It's the Greek word where we get our English root word for dynamite, **and of the Holy Spirit.** God was working through their words and their intentionality to make a mark on these people, to change them. That's what he goes on to say. **But it happened as he was among them.** Chapter 2, verse 8, says, "**We shared our very lives with you."**

They were waking up with these people. They were eating with these people. They were sharing their lives with these people, and the people could watch them and see that what they were talking about was true in their lives. They were intentional. How did it change them? Verse 6:

> **You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit,**

Those two words we're kind of seeing here, it's important we understand the difference. We just saw the word **tribulation**. Later on in this chapter we're going to see the word *wrath*. These are two different Greek words, and throughout the New Testament, when you see the word **tribulation**, it's used of believers that are facing hardship or persecution or trials. But it's a different Greek word for the word wrath, and when you look at the New Testament, the word wrath is used exclusively to refer to God's final judgment on the wicked—two different things. But these new believers were facing extreme trials, tribulations, and maybe to understand a little bit of their world and what they would have been walking into, it might help to geek out on history just a little bit.

Bear with me for a second. Just before the time that Jesus was born on this earth, there was a reigning emperor, Julius Caesar, who was around in the Roman Empire. During that time, there are two Latin words that were used for the word god. First was "Dei", D-E-I. This meant *immortal god*, like Jupiter who was also known as the king of the gods, right? But when the emperors would refer to themselves as gods, they weren't talking about that. There was another Latin word that they used, "Deus", and this word meant a deified human, and they would try to surround that with all sorts of things. They would have temples built for them all over the Roman Empire. There were altars for these Caesars. They would have festivals to honor them. They would have inscriptions on their statues that would say, "the deified one", even the money would bear their head, their image, with words that would say either "Son of a Deified One" or declare them to be "Deified". It was a cult worship of these people.

And yet, just after Julius Caesar, another person would be born fully human and yet fully God, who would declare Himself to be the King Himself, to be God. In fact, Julius Caesar was assassinated not long before Jesus would come into this world. And after he was assassinated, two of the assassins, Cassius and Brutus, fled from Rome, went over the sea, fled up through Greece all the way into Turkey and tried to raise up an army to come back to Rome. Two other people were there at that time, Octavian who was Julius' adopted son, who had become Caesar Augustus, a name you would recognize from Luke chapter 2, and Mark Anthony. They came from Rome, rose up, got an army, and started to head east after the assassins. Well, the assassins had gathered their army and started to head west, and they met in Philippi. A historic battle took place right in the backyard of Thessalonica. As Octavian was coming up east through Thessalonica, they had to make a choice as a city, who they were going to follow, whose side they were going to be on. Was it with the assassins or was it with Octavian and Marc Anthony? They chose Octavian.

So, during the battle they would supply them with supplies, food, whatever they needed for the battle, which ticked off the assassins so much that they said, “Hey, when we're done, you can go pillage Thessalonica.” But this city had chosen right because Octavian won, and he would go on to become Caesar Augustus. And he would start to fill and load the city of Thessaloniki—Thessalonica—with all sorts of benefactions. He created a flowing water system through aqueducts, into streets and roads. They had statues; they had fountains. He gave them money, put up arenas; there were all sorts of things, theaters, all these benefactions that helped the city to prosper and grow. The more that they would give their allegiance to Rome, (they wanted to keep it coming), the more that they would get. After Caesar Augustus, came the emperor Claudius, who continued in the same fashion. He actually had a temple built in his name as well and continued in the same way. So now, here sits these Christians in this city, with all of this Roman influence, and these Caesars, these emperors, who say that they are god, and you are getting the benefit of all these things from them, not only you but your whole family. And yet, that's why in Acts chapter 17, verse 7, they were so scared, that they said…***and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another King, Jesus.”***

For me to follow Jesus in this culture means that I am walking against Rome. This isn't an idol of a stone god. This is a person who comes with a military force. This is dangerous; this could take my life. Not only that, this could cut me out of the benefits that I'm receiving. “When I choose to follow Jesus, I'm going to face hardship.” That's the tribulation that he's talking about for these Christians now in Thessalonica. But he says they did it **with joy** and they became **imitators**. When we think of imitators, we think maybe in negative terms, that they're something fake or counterfeit, some kind of try-hard, right? It's something that is not authentic or real, but that's not what he's talking about here.

Think of the Jewish system of the rabbis. When rabbis would go and choose their followers, they would choose people that they believed could become like them. They would invite them to follow them; they would start to teach and there was an expectation, as they did, that these followers would then be with them. They would follow him everywhere he went, that they would live by his teaching, that they would imitate his actions, and that everything else would become secondary to that of the rabbi. That's what Jesus did when He chose His disciples.

Remember Jesus, out walking with His disciples, and Peter is in the boat? With that context and understanding of followership, listen to how one of the scholars wrote about that experience. *When Jesus, the rabbi, had walked on water, Peter, the student disciple, wanted to be like Him. Certainly, Peter had not walked on water before, nor could he have imagined being able to do so on his own. However, if the teacher who chose me, because He believed I could become like Him, can, then so must I, and he did. And it was a miracle. He was just like the rabbi. And then he doubted, but doubted what? Traditionally, we've said that he doubted Jesus' power, maybe. But Jesus is still standing on the water. I believe Peter doubted himself, or maybe better his capacity to be empowered by Jesus. When Jesus responds, “Why did you doubt?” it means, “Why did you doubt that I can empower you to be like Me?”*

These believers, facing all sorts of hardship, had the power of the Holy Spirit to continue to live out lives, just like their rabbi, just like Jesus. In fact, they were following the example of the others that had taught them. It says **of us**, the example of us and of God. So he's showing them the way

to follow Jesus. I wonder if you and I ever doubt that we can truly become like Jesus. "Maybe somebody else can, but I just can't do it." You're right. You can't. But the power of the Holy Spirit in you can achieve and accomplish incredible things in and through your life.

Verse 7 goes on to say, …**so that**. Now Paul uses this word all the time also throughout this letter: twice in chapter one; twice in chapter two; twice in chapter three; twice in chapter four, and one final time in chapter five. And when he uses this word, he uses it to display what his intention is, as he poured into them. Why?

> **…so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place *the news of* your faith toward God has gone out, so that we have no need to say anything.** (Vs. 7-8)

This was not some kind of happenstance thing—that these people had turned from these idols and started following God and their lives were changed, transformed. This is intentional effort put into these people by Paul, Timothy, and Silas. It was a focus mission. And because of that, they became an example to all the other churches. The word about them spread all over, not only in Macedonia, which would have been Philippi and Berea, Thessalonica, but also Achaia, which would have been Corinth and Athens. Everywhere! It says it boomed out; it was like dropping a rock in a pond, and the ripples continued out, or like the thunder on a storm that rolls through and echoes across the area. Paul says there's not even any need for me to say anything more. But then he goes on to write four more chapters. Typical Paul, right? That's not what he's saying. He's saying, "Hey, I don't need to say more, because you, your very lives, people are talking about it, and you are sharing what happened in your lives." You're sharing the gospel that has transformed you and people are talking about it. When people travel from place to place to place to place, they're talking about those people in Thessalonica—about the ways that their lives have dramatically changed, about the way that their love is pouring out, about the way their hope is pouring out, about the way their faith is being displayed. He goes on in verse 9:

> **For they themselves report about us as to the kind of reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God…**

These people that had been following idols, that had given their allegiance to Caesar, that were hoping to gain all of the things they desired through following the cultural norms and achieving through the system, they turned to God, which meant they turned from those idols to serve Him. Now it's God that allows and empowers them to turn. But they have to join Him in that.

How often, Church, do we have idols where we say, "I want to serve God, but I kind of want to bring this thing with me too. Can't I have both?" We say we don't have idols in this culture. There's no stones; there's no images. What if an idol is anything that takes your affection and attention more than God? What if you're asking, "Hey, if I just had this, then my life would be complete." "If I just found that perfect person to marry," or, "If I just made it on this team," or "If I just got this promotion," or, "If I just had this income," or, "If we just took that trip," or, just fill in the blank for whatever, "then I'd be satisfied."

Old French theologian, Calvin, said this about idols: “The human heart is a factory of idols. Every one of us is, from his mother's womb, expert in inventing idols.” Keller puts an idol this way: “An idol is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give.”

I wonder if I looked through your calendar. I wonder if I looked through your bank account. I wonder if I could see your passions. What takes your thoughts throughout the day? I wonder if I could follow you around in life, I wonder what that would display? Would that display God's affections, that He has your heart and He has all of you, or would that take me down a rabbit trail of idols you continue to pursue. He closes out with verse 10:

> **…and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, *that is*, Jesus who rescues us from the wrath to come.**

When he says **wait** here, he's not talking about doing nothing. It means to wait with patience, confidently expectant. It's that picture of your kids or your cousins or nieces or nephews, when they know somebody's coming. They're waiting by the window, excited for them, and they're rolling around, getting things ready in the house for them to come. It's this expectancy; it's in the action. Church, as I was thinking through this, and thinking through the thought of how do we live a life that makes an impact, it reminds me it happens in the day to day. But it doesn't happen by chance. It happens with great intentionality, through the influence of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in our lives, and through our influence into the lives of others.

It forced me to take a look at my week, my calendar, to take a look at the things that I'm doing and giving my time and attention and focus to. There was even a moment where I sat and thought, “The people that God has in my life right now to influence are my kids.” But yeah, I can get so absorbed in the chaotic activities of things, that I'm not intentionally trying to pour my life in Christ into their lives, and start to make a change, a rotation. I'm going to have breakfast with my kids at a certain time. I am going to put it on my calendar, so that we can talk about life and talk about Jesus and what's happening there. For sure it's far beyond that. It absorbs into the things that they're doing. But, it also takes time and focus intentionally for the intentionality for me to desire to pour my life in Christ into the life of another person.

I wonder who God may have put around your life. You think, “I never could”, but through the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through you, through your intentionality, through your faith, and through your love, and through your hope in Jesus Christ, that you could help influence them to follow Jesus, to become more like Jesus. You could give your time and attention and effort to help them know more about who He is. I wonder what in your schedule may need to reorient as you look through this next week, so you can live a life of purpose and intentionality. Church, if you want to make a mark on this world, if you want to make an impact, imitate Jesus. Reorient your life around His life, His schedule, and His intentionality into the lives of other people. That, Church, is what will leave an imprint on this world.

Let’s pray:

Jesus, thank You so much that You came to give us life. Thank You for the example of these believers that found the fullness of that life in You, and went to other places, to other people, spent time with them, pursued them, poured into them, shared the truth from Your Word, and lived it out through their lives, God, and the impact that made on this young church. Thank You for the way that that had a domino effect, as that young church, followed their example and continue to do it into the lives of others as well. God, we long to be that church, a church that comes together to know You, to become more like You, and to help others do the same. Jesus, may that be true in our lives this very week. We pray this in Your name, Amen.

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Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
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WINTER 2023 // WEEK 1

Life Group Questions

A People of Hope // January 14/15, 2023

Imitation, Influence, and Impact // 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Introduction

1 Thessalonians was one of the first letters written by Paul and he specifically mentions that he did not write it alone— Silas and Timothy were his co-authors. Because of this, a strong theme of supporting each other through community shines through in this book. This week we notice that spiritual influence begins with intentionality.

To think through the main ideas in the sermon and prepare for your discussion together, we invite you to look over all the questions on the following pages and write your thoughts down before you meet with your group. Due to preferences over a wide range of groups, we do not expect you will cover every question each week.

Warm Up *(Suggested time: 30 min)*

1) **Who was a person you felt honored to meet and would enjoy having a chance to meet up with again sometime? What would you talk about at that next meeting?**

2) **If you could have any one prayer answered, what would it be?**

Getting Started

Transition into group discussion.

1) Open group discussion with prayer. Here are a few potential prayer items:
    a. For the Spirit of God to lead you in truth
    b. For the fruit of the Spirit to be cultivated in your lives
    c. For grace to hear and apply what the Spirit says to you
2) Choose someone to read the passage aloud for the group.

Study Questions *(Suggested time: 40 min)*

1) In this week's sermon, what did you find most interesting about the background information on the people and times in which this book was written? How do you suppose knowing that will help you relate better to the message of this book?

2) We learned about the Thessalonian church when we studied Acts. Read Acts 17:1-9 to refresh your memory. From this account, what do we learn about those who likely made up this young church?
What kind of spiritual climate was this church planted into?

How did Paul approach the Thessalonians with the gospel message, as recorded in Acts 17:2-3?

Put yourself in the place of young Silas alongside Paul in these first days with the Thessalonians before a church had even formed. Are you hopeful or discouraged? What might you be thinking and feeling about what is to come?

3) Now, back to Thessalonians 1:2-3. What 3 characteristics are given about this body of believers, and what action leads to each of these characteristics?
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Of the three things listed above how are you experiencing any of them in your life?

Which ones are a challenge to you right now? What makes them so challenging?

4) Thessalonians 1:6-7 tells us two things that these believers "became"; write them below:

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Who did they imitate and what pressed them to do so?

Read Hebrews 6:11-12 and discuss how this relates to what Paul says about who we imitate.

5) The Thessalonian believers "turned to God from idols" in order to fully serve the living God. In what ways do you need to reorganize and reorient your time and priorities to fully serve Jesus?

Who might Jesus be calling you to invest intentional influence into right now?

If this is a struggle for you, how might your Life Group support you throughout this session?

Personal Spiritual Exercises

Just like physical exercises help strengthen and stretch our bodies for healthy living, these spiritual exercises are meant to move us spiritually in ways that may be new so we might experience inner growth. Since God longs for us to experience Him with our whole selves—mind, body, spirit—we invite you along each week to strengthen your souls with suggestions and prompts. Next week in Life Group, take a few moments to share how the Lord may have used this exercise in your life.

Prayer Focus: Soul Searching Pastor Josh reminded us that when Jesus marks our life, we exemplify Him in following His ways. Spend some time alone in a quiet spot and ask the Spirit of God to reveal the marks of Jesus on your life. How did those marks come to you? What were those experiences or insights like?

1. Pray with gratitude for the way Jesus is seen in your life.
2. Pray to have words and actions that sound forth the gospel to those who are watching you.

Scripture Focus: Begin and end each day reading or reciting Psalm 23. This Psalm is a clear reminder of the goodness of God and the way He tenderly leads and provides for us. At the end of the week, reflect on how your relationship with God was affected by making time for this simple practice.

Prayer *(Suggested time: 20 min)*

A significant part of “coming together” is being open and honest with our lives. Sitting in a group of people for prayer may be new or it may be familiar to you. If you would rather not pray aloud when it is your turn, feel free to pray silently and then say “Amen” aloud signaling the next person in the group to pray. Whether or not you choose to verbalize your prayer, everyone is a participant in sharing this time before God together.

Take a few moments to prepare a prayer request. What did the message, working through the above questions or the discussion cause you to notice about your own relationship with Jesus? Would you be willing to share your prayer request with the group?