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[0 : 00] So, we're starting a new series, and it's on First Thessalonians, which we've read the first chapter of. We're going to look at it over July and August, before we start something else in September.

So, as always, when we start a new series, I just want to remind you of my need for your cooperation. Okay? When we're starting a new series, it's just good to be reminded that it's very important that you come having thought about and prayed about, coming to worship, that you're looking for God to speak to you through the preached word, through His living word, and that you know that He knows what's in your heart, and that He will speak to you as you need Him to through the word.

And I need that help, and I need you to draw out the work of God from the Scripture in the sermons I prepare. So that it's all a partnership. It looks very one-sided. It doesn't look like I'm doing all the work, that you're just doing all the passive listening, but it's not, we're really all in this together, and we're all working together prayerfully and spiritually to receive from God and to worship together. So, I crave your participation and your help as in the past. And the kids might notice who helped Paul to plant the church in Thessalonica.

Well, I've put their s for Silas and t for Timothy, not Sylvainas as it was in the ESV reading.

[1 : 30] Okay, so this is the story of a church plant, a new church in the first century. It's the kind of thing that we're doing again in St. Columbas, and again the children will see that I've mentioned there the church plants that we've started in, I was going to say Cornhill, Cornhill.

Crestorfin, Crestorfin? Cornerstone, I can't even read my own writing. Crestorfin there's going to be one. Oh, maybe I am prophetic. Cornerstone, Harington, Winchborough, Esk Valley, and as we plant churches, we are fulfilling the great commission that Paul was also seeking to fulfill in the first century.

Different times, same vision. So I hope that maybe sometime today or in the next few days you'll go home and read the whole letter, and maybe read the whole two letters because there's a first and a second Thessalonians.

And go back and read the section in Acts as well, in Acts chapter 17. If your parents tell the story to your kids, maybe even dramatize it with them and go through what happened and bring it alive a little bit more, bring a bit of life to the whole story because it's a living story.

Thessalonica was a Greek city. It was a kind of commercial center. It was also a cultic center, and it was an economic center.

[2 : 55] They minted coins. In fact, they minted a coin to Caesar as God, which was both good economically for them, and it was also good as a political expedient to be in favor with Rome, their great overseers.

There was a synagogue in the middle of this city, where the Jews who had dispersed from Jerusalem would gather together and they would worship. And as often was the case with Paul and his team, they would go first to the synagogue because their people knew about the Bible, and they preached from the Old Testament about Jesus coming.

And very soon, people became Christians there. Some Jews became Christians, some Greeks became Christians, some very prominent women became Christians, and also some pagans became Christians.

Seem to have been a short but really successful spiritual time when many people followed Jesus. Paul and Silas and Timothy, they went around the houses and they taught them.

Paul also worked. He worked as a tent maker all during the day, and then probably as he was making tents and mending tents, he spoke to people and told them about Jesus. And then they

went round houses, and Jason's house was one of them, obviously, and they worshiped and they taught and they grew together and they were disciplined.

[4 : 18] And they really grew a bond of love together, leaders and people in this new church plant. And very soon, the Jewish, the group of Jewish hardline believers recognized the threat of the Christian influence and also recognized the threat of their position within the city, kind of safe position in kind of relationship with the leaders and with the Roman authorities and the Greek authorities.

And so they stirred up a riot against the gospel and against this young church and made it out to be very seditious and a very dangerous thing.

And of course, Jason was hauled in and he was posted bail, but he was threatened and they were threatened and they realized that Paul and Silas and Timothy would probably lose their lives if they stayed.

So they were taken out. They were taken out safely out of Thessalonica. They went to Berea and then they went to Athens after that.

But Paul was really missing this young church plant. It will be like me when Robin comes to Winchborough and I'm back here. I love being back here, but I'll also really miss going out to Winchborough on a Wednesday evening, which I've been doing regularly and I might just drop in every so often.

[5 : 50] Paul was desperate to find out about what was happening in Thessalonica. He was a bit worried about the church just falling apart. And so he sent Timothy back and Timothy went there and then Timothy returned with a really good report.

He's saying things were great, things were going really well. And so then Paul writes this letter in response to Timothy's report and he's really wanting just to teach them and help them in a situation where they're under conflict, where there's persecution and where it's difficult.

Now, different situation, different time. We're in 21st century Western world, but there's still pressures for us as Christians and as a church. And obviously we're a much older church. We're not a church plant. But do remember some of the pressures of new churches and the churches that we were planting ourselves as well as other churches. Now there is relentless pressure today in our churches and as Christians to accept the current morality that surrounds us today, the secular agenda, some of the assumptions that are made, some of the theories. And we're pressured to be silent. We're pressured not to live out your faith, to have our faith blunted, to have our faith so vague that it doesn't really make any difference and challenges nobody.

[7 : 15] And so some of the issues might be different, but the teaching that Paul brings to that church but also to us, the principles he brings are absolutely relevant.

Not only because they're relevant because he is speaking into a similar situation, but because it's the living word of God. And it never ceases to be relevant.

And it never ceases to be important and God will breathe into our hearts and lives what he wants us to hear. So I'm going to say a couple of things about this chapter.

And the first is that the Apostolic foundations that were laid here by Paul and others, they still apply. And the first thing is that they describe church here as God's family. And that happens right through the New Testament, right through the epistles, is that God wants us to understand church in terms of family.

[8 : 18] You know, we know that he introduces God as our Father in this passage in verse 1, but he goes on in many places right throughout this letter to speak about the brothers, for we know brothers loved by God.

And that's just a term that just, it means brothers and sisters. It means family. It means probably the best way to translate it would be siblings, because there's that whole idea of being a family together.

And that's the model that we have here for the church that's just as relevant today as it was then, the language of family. And he does that, and God does that because it implies some important thing, implies that we know one another, doesn't it?

That's what family, the best outworking of families are families that know one another. And now we know there's dysfunctional families and there's families that don't, but the best idea of loving family is that there's knowledge of one another, there's community, there's visibility with one another.

We share characteristics, and obviously as Christians we share characteristics with God as our Father and with our fellow Christians as our brothers and sisters.

[9 : 32] And I just want to throw out that question this morning, how do you view church? What do you think of church? When that word comes up, what do you think of, or what do you think when you come along to church?

Do you see it institutionally as a denomination? Do you see it organizationally, something you come along to that's very highly organized or not sometimes?

Do you see it formally? Is it a formal meeting together? Or do you recognize it as it's so often emphasized in the Scripture as being a family?

I think it's very easy for us to impose sometimes our dysfunctional family experiences onto our model of church life. I'll say a little bit more about that later.

Sometimes when we maybe come from not strong and healthy and good family context, then we maybe think, well, that's how you view church in the same kind of slightly dysfunctional and isolated and separated way out.

[10 : 38] Or you see it institutionally as maybe a corrupt organization or maybe a disinterested organizational reality.

But the New Testament and Paul here, and particularly in the way he built churches, church plants, with this great family context that we're brothers and sisters with God as our Father.

Okay, so that's the basic premise. But they go on to example what that looked like, both as leaders and as they wanted everyone in the church to recognize.

They saw the importance of both their teaching and their life and their example. Now I'm going to say a little bit about leadership.

I'll say more in future weeks because there's quite a lot about leadership later on. But for leaders and for all of us, do you recognize and do you realize the value of your life within the congregation and the fact that we're called to be imitated?

[11 : 51] Are we confident enough that our life is such that we could use it as an illustration of the gospel and say, well, imitate me as I imitate Christ. We'll see that a little bit more in a minute.

So the example of what it looks like to be in a family context together, both by how they live and what they communicated.

How they live, verse 5 of chapter 1, it says, you know, because our gospel came to you not only in word and also in power and in the Holy Spirit with full conviction. You know the kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake and you became imitators of us and the Lord.

They were known. You know, they weren't there for a long time, but they went wholeheartedly and they became known and how they lived was significant and important.

And they lived their lives as if their lives were an open book. And that's a crucial reality for us as a church family, not just for leadership, although it's very important for leadership, but for us all that we live our lives as an open book.

[12 : 57] You know, you know, is that something we can say, well, you know what I'm like, you know how I live, you know what my life is like. Now that takes time and it takes effort and it takes commitment.

But that's a responsibility that we all have as we belong to the church. And as leaders, the leadership ethos in St. Columbus, maybe as it's developed, it's maybe not formulated strongly as it should, but we don't seek to lead by dictat and our leadership is not positional, it's relational and should always be relational to be spiritually known and imitated.

That's an amazing verse, verse 6. You became imitators of us and of the Lord for you received the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit.

You became imitators of us. Who of us would be, any of us, leaders or people within the congregation, who of us would be confident enough to make that incredible statement?

They were known and they lived with integrity and with openness as a people. Now we all have a role to play in that, sometimes we have a formal role in leadership.

[14 : 14] There's many informal roles in leadership in St. C's, but even as parents, as brothers, as sisters of your own family or in your workplace or university, whatever it is, whatever role we have, we are to aspire surely as Christians, followers of Jesus, to live in such a way where we could encourage other people to imitate our dependence on Christ.

Wow, that is strong stuff. Let that sink in and challenge you and me about our life, so they lived in such a way.

Now, the great challenge is that love hurts, doesn't it? And family life is costly. It's often very beautiful, but it's also sometimes brutal, let's be honest about that.

And I wonder if maybe this morning as you're hearing this, you're saying, oh no, I would much rather that Jesus allowed my Christian life to be a solo journey.

It'd be so much easier. Now, you probably know the quote that I'm going to lay on you at this point, because I've used it before, and if you've ever done marriage prep with me, you'll have got this quote as well.

[15:27] Can we have the quote up from C.S. Lewis, you know it, isn't it? To love at all is vulnerable. Love anything in your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give it to no one, not even to an animal.

Wrap it carefully around with hobbies, little luxuries. Avoid all entanglements, lock it up and safe in casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change, it will not be broken, it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.

To love is to be vulnerable. And that goes for loving one another in a church context as family. We have to overcome our fear of being hurt.

You will be. Lack of trust, it will be broken. To let down you'll feel it will happen because we live often that way in our relationship with Jesus and yet He forgives us and loves us.

And we have to accept and live His love through others, both as we sacrificially give it and as we receive it. There's no other model. I can't give you any other model. I can't say there's a solo path that you can walk to follow Jesus because He calls us to be family and He calls us to be a church and a people together.

[16:51] So we cry out for His help to do that. Now if you've grown up in a great family, naturally, wonderful, loving, close family, then maybe church for you falls very far short of what you've experienced.

And you kind of give up on churches. It was not like my natural family. I'll just stick with them. Or maybe you've had a terrible family upbringing and experience.

And you're maybe biased against the whole concept haunted by the concept of family and commitment and love and vulnerability. And so again, you pull back from the idea of church as family.

But please, please see that God will help us to view family differently and experience family differently by His grace and enable us to be patient and long-suffering and compassionate and possibly even allow what we experience in our church family to remodel our natural families' experiences.

So how they lived, you know, they lived as those who were known and imitated. But they also, they example what it looked like to be in family by how and what they communicated as leaders in the church.

[18:20] And there's a little bit about that on the children's worksheet as well. The way they communicated. And if I covered it in one phrase, it would be the intentionally encouraged.

The way they communicated reflected their idea of family. They intentionally encouraged the church. And they said two things.

They said many more things, but I'm only going to pick up on two. You're valued and you're chosen. And that's the message from God. So those are part of God's family, one that were valued and one that they were chosen.

We're valued. Verses two and three says, Paul says to them, to this church, this young church plant, we give thanks to God always for all of you constantly mentioning in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father, your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Brilliant, aren't they? Brilliant words. Paul spoke to this young church and he intentionally encouraged them and said to them, look, I value you. God value you.

[19:30] I give thankful prayer to you. The apostle, he was planting churches all over the Middle East and yet he had time to write back to them and to tell them what he thought of them, his great love and his prayerfulness.

He made time to pray for them and to speak to them words of encouragement, speaks of his interest, of his commitment and of the bread of his prayer life for the church.

As he was willing to be vulnerable and known by the church, so he also wanted them to know that he knew them and he prayed for them.

And he prayed and he told them that he prayed for them and he told them what he prayed for them. It wasn't just that, you know, he would heal their corns or that they would have a nice day in the office.

But he prayed kind of meaningful spiritual prayers that they were growing in faith and hope and in love. So there was a spiritual knowledge of this young group.

[20 : 37] He recognized that there was growth and he knew that growth. It wasn't just, hello, how are you doing? Hey, I'm the apostle and leaving out and going. I was like, I don't have time for you. I'm planning churches over the world. Someone else will speak to you. He knew them. He had time for them. People mattered to him because Jesus, he knew that he mattered to Jesus and Jesus loved him.

Great general principle. If we do anything in our lives as a church, let's be intentional encouragers. Anyone, can I give you a secret?

Anyone can discourage. We don't need any gifts to do that. We don't need any intentionality. We just, we do it by nature. We discourage and we are careless and thoughtless so easily with one another, but too intentionally encourages such a wonderful gift from God.

And it's a great general principle. Let's be a people who pray for and pray with one another like Paul did knowingly.

[21 : 41] It's an amazing secret here, isn't it, that Paul knew the kind of things to pray for because he knew them. I actually, I do think and include myself in this, I don't think we're great at this.

I don't think we're great at praying for one another. And I certainly don't think we're great for encouraging one another in our spiritual characteristics.

You know, taking someone aside and saying, I'm so grateful for the way I've seen you grow as a Christian in A, X, Y and Z ways. Why is that? Why are we so embarrassed by that? Why do we find that so difficult? Why do we find it difficult to take someone and pray with them as Christians together? Is it because we don't know them?

We wouldn't know what to say. It's not that cool. I'm not sure why we find that difficult to be specific, itemizing personal spiritual characteristics.

[22 : 36] So that we're not just praying maybe about crisis or about practical issues, important though they are, but that we pray the faith, hope and love stuff that Paul speaks about here, verse 3 and 4.

Why do we do that? Because when you say you're praying for someone, because you are praying for them, it announces to them, you are valued, doesn't it? You're valued.

I care. I've taken time this morning. I've got a prayer diary. I've written your name in it. You're not forgotten. And why is that important?

Because it reminds us, if our fellow Christians are doing it, it reminds us that Jesus is always doing it. And that's what's really important.

Romans 8.34 tells us, who then of you can know and Christ Jesus who died more than that who was raised to life is at the right hand of God is also interceding for us.

[23 : 34] So when a fellow Christian prays for you, it reminds you that already Jesus is doing it. Jesus is praying for us and we imitate the divine family, the Trinity in our lives, one to another.

I wonder if our model of church, if it goes as far as family as a model, does it go as far as being a family that prays for one another?

Do we know people well enough to say, to give thanks for them, for who they are and for their spiritual lives and their gifts, and telling them that?

It goes against all our Scottish Presbyterian Calvinistic background, doesn't it, to be open and spiritual and vulnerable at that level.

So you are valued as the first thing. The second thing is, and with this I close, you are chosen, verses 4 to 10, for we know brothers loved by God that He has chosen you because our gospel came to you not only in word but in power and the Holy Spirit and in full conviction and so on to the end of that section.

[24 : 42] And Paul is reminding them as a family that they're valued because of Jesus and what He's done and because of His continued intercession, because He's working the cross, His resurrection, His intercession, but also because you're chosen now.

The great reality of this is that what Paul is reminding the church and what God's reminding us as Christians is that this is God's church. We are God's people and it still is.

He has purposed that you're here today. Maybe you're here for the first time. Maybe you're here for the last time, but God is sovereign and God has purposed and planned our lives.

And there's great mystery, isn't there, that we choose Christ, we choose to follow Christ, we choose to come and give ourselves faith to Him as our Savior, yet we are chosen by Him.

He is at work even in that choice. Now that changes everything. It reminds us not only that we're chosen, but within that also that we're valued, doesn't it?

[25 : 52] For everyone who will come, we come to appreciate that we are chosen and kept and protected by Him. Ephesians 1, 4 and 5, for He chose us in Him before the creation of the world.

To be holy and blameless in this light, to be predestined for adoption, you see that whole family concept again, to sonship through Jesus Christ in accordance with His pleasure and will, to the praise of His glorious grace, which He's freely given us in the one He loves, chosen but we choose.

That gives us great confidence. It's humbling to the nth degree, but it enables us to worship.

And how do we know that we are a people chosen by God? How do we know we're redeemed?

Well, we know because His Word has changed us. You know, the gospel came to you not only in Word but in power and the Holy Spirit and will fill conviction.

So when you became a Christian and as you keep on being a Christian, the evidence is that the Word of God has changed you. They're not just words. It's not just a flat book of old boring, dull history.

[27 : 03] It's not what other people might regard as fiction. We recognize its historicity, its relevance, and its living authority over our lives.

The fact that you are still here under the Word, the fact that you woke up this morning as a Christian still believing that the Word changes you in the preaching, which I mentioned at the beginning.

As you read the Bible, as it transforms you from your conscience out, we're convicted when we see God at work in our lives, changing us, convicting us of sin, renewing us, transforming us.

Yes, I know it's by degrees. And yes, I know we want more. And yes, I would love to see more and more people coming to faith through the Word of God that comes with full conviction in the power of the Holy Spirit.

But each time that you fall on your knees, whether physically or metaphorically, asking for forgiveness and help to turn back to God, every time your conscience pricks you about what you're doing in your life before the Savior who loves you, that is you hearing His voice, that is you being refreshed, that's you starting again.

[28 : 18] That is the Word coming to you in power and in the Holy Spirit. But also we receive the Word and recognize the Word and receive it with joy.

You became imitators of us in verse 6, and of the Lord as you received the Word with much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit. So you became an example to all the believers.

So there's a sense in which, now I know we don't receive it with the joy we should, that we're aiming to, but there's many times, isn't there many times you've opened the Bible, you've been struggling and you've read something and it's just absolutely filled you with joy because you know that God is speaking to you.

And you become His Word then in many ways to other people. Your response to the Word is an evidence of you having been chosen and having chosen to follow Jesus.

Just think of if we took the Bible into maybe the Scottish Parliament or the council offices or your workplace or among your friends and you read a passage.

[29 : 26] Generally speaking, it wouldn't be received. And it certainly wouldn't be received with joy. But as Christians, we recognize and know that God has changed our hearts and every Christian's heart has changed.

And we are aware, it speaks about idolatry here, but we're aware of the kind of things that can be idols for ourselves as well. And we recognize and see that as we worship God for who He is, that He is the one that is only worthy of first place in our lives.

And also as we receive His Word, look at that last verse, I finished with this last verse, and we wait for His Son from heaven whom He raised from the dead Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

This risen Savior is ascended, who is returning. We recognize that purpose and plan of God that we ourselves have been rescued from the coming wrath.

Now, the wrath of God, with this I finish, is probably the hardest concept for anyone in the Western world to accept. And maybe even as Christians, we find it hard to accept the idea of God's wrath and God's judgment and God's justice.

[30 : 47] The idea, you know, that for a twenty-first century person, we're accountable to someone greater than ourselves, someone greater than them, the corporate group of humanity, that we're accountable but we fall short.

That God would be justified in His wrath and judgment and that we incur His righteous anger against our sin, of which death is the penalty. Sin, the wages of sin, we're told is death.

That's unfathomable to the vast majority of people around us in the world in which we live.

Absolutely unfathomable. Mock and deride the whole concept, calling it Philistine and out of date and out of time and not worthy of a sophisticated society yet.

All the time, as a society, we are setting our own bar of justice. We've never lived in a more wrathful, in many ways, individual, judgmental society.

Just take a look at the responses on social media that we find. We know that our society has standards of morality.

[32 : 02] We know they have standards of judgment. We know that they reject and are angry at anyone, often, who is different from them. So there is much judgment and there is much wrath, but it's very much on our own terms.

The concept is there, but not the standard, not the God, not the person in His perfect holiness and justice, which is why you and I must keep going back to the cross.

We need to keep going back to the cross because there we find both God's justice and God's love being poured out in our place.

He dies so that we don't die. The wages of sin is death. We took these wages in our place so that as we trust and believe in Him, we can know His love and His grace and His forgiveness and His justice satisfied and His love assuaged for us.

That's why the cross is so important because it speaks both of His justice and of His love and mercy. It's the greatest and the most mysterious act of love in the universe.

[33 : 23] If you're not a Christian, can I encourage you to think about the truth of God's Word and the truth of the cross of Jesus Christ, of which we can never be ashamed because it puts all of life into its context and gives us an answer.

Can I encourage you to be challenged and to consider Jesus? If you're a Christian, can I ask you to be encouraged and to look around you?

And to be the Word to other people, to challenge and encourage them. Remember that you are valued and that you are chosen and that that changes everything.

I mean, let's pray. Father God, help us to know more about you and know more about your Word and understand that it's living and vibrant and passionately relevant to our hearts, our day-to-day living, our life, our death.

That you are the one God and there is one salvation, there is one crucifixion, there is one resurrection and one ascension, there is one message.

[34 : 42] And Lord, help us to be family together. Give us where we fail and fall and stumble, where we act more like glorious isolates than we do as family, brothers and sisters.

Remember us as leaders as we try and live out that example, but all of us as we seek to be imitators of you so that others will imitate us.

And Lord, help us to pray for one another. Pray not only for one another, but pray until one another that and also pray together, the great value of praying together and the importance of recognizing as a family that we pray to our Father who we need.

So help us in all of these things we ask and pray in Jesus' name. Amen.