

Church People
1Thessalonians 2:17-20
November 23, 2008
FBC Waynesboro

Gather a group of preachers together anywhere at any time and you will hear a conversation like this one: “hey man, how’s your church going?” “Oh, it would be just wonderful if it wasn’t for the church people?” Jerry Vines who is one of our finest expositors of the Word of God said recently that during his years at First Baptist Jacksonville that he wrote out his resignation almost one hundred times on Monday mornings because of church people. He would pray and prepare all week, stand and preach with power and passion only to stand at the door and hear complaints about everything from the temperature in the sanctuary to the length of the sermon to the quality of the music. And then do the same thing over on Sunday night. Church people. Someone once asked the wonderful and godly Warren Wiersbe if he ever took Monday as his day off, and Wiersbe’s reply was, “no man; why would I take a day off when I feel that bad. Preach my heart out on Sunday and people are paying more attention to getting home for kick-off than they are their response to the Word of God.” Church People.

Paul had problems with people in his churches. In fact, we would not have a single letter from Paul in the New Testament if it were not for problems in the churches and all the problems were the result of people. People in Thessalonica were confused about the second coming and had stopped working to wait on Jesus. People in Philippi were fighting over an issue of such insignificance that it is not even named. There was continuous corruption in Corinth and carnality in Galatia not to mention the criticism, castigation and condemnation that Paul faced from church people. BUT THERE IS ALSO AND FAR MORE SIGNIFICANTLY THIS REALITY: PAUL LOVED THE PEOPLE OF THE CHURCH. He would call his brothers and sisters in Philippi his joy and his crown. They were those in whom he delighted. And as corrupt as was the church in Corinth he loved them and he cared for them. Read Romans sixteen and listen to Paul as he says over and over again, “greet this one and that one and the other one . . .” these are his brothers and sisters in the Lord. They are along with him the people of the church; they are church people. And it is emphatic in these words.

If you love Jesus, it is inevitable that you will love His church. It is the first manifestation of our love for Jesus, absent which our words about loving Jesus are simply a denial of a fundamentally basic biblical truth. And to love the church is to love the people, our brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ. This is one of those sermons that I have been so eager to deliver; like most, it has been in me all week but this one is different. God has moved in my spirit this week to cause me to think about the people of this church and in this wonderful season of Thanksgiving to give thanks for church people and for all that we share together. In fact, one day this week as I sat and reflected on this text; I began to recall just a few of the many people in this church who are now in glory who have had such a significant influence in my life. I thought of Ena North and Kathleen Cates who were my card playing buddies in the early days. They loved me and cared for me. I remembered the night that we went to sing Christmas Carols at Kathleen's house and she wasn't even at home. Charlie Fales asked the next year if I could possibly arrange it so that we could at least sing at people's homes who were inside them. I remembered Jane Ellis such a saint of God. She came to visit me the very first Monday that I was in my office. She called to ask if she could come see me; it scared me. For five years in my previous church I had had a visitor every Monday morning. For five years, this visitor started my Monday by going over his list of things that I had done wrong on Sunday all of it he would assure me was done in love just to make me a better preacher. She came in to my office, this saint of God and just said, "preacher, I just want to tell you that I am thankful that you are my pastor." I thought of Marjie and Torbit Banks. No man influenced me more in my early days here than Torbit and no woman was more lovingly plain than Marjie. I learned very early on that the kitchen was not my kitchen. I thought of Roger Barefield who was a gold mine of great wisdom. I used to go sit in his woodworking shop and just listen to me. He told me once that I was going to have to stop coming because I was making the whole neighborhood mad since I came to see him and not the rest of them; so he suggested a clandestine scheme that had me park at the bottom of the hill and slip into the woodworking shop. I thought of John Thomas Martin with whom I had so many biblical discussions and all of them so enriching to me and my friend Wayne Cooper whose chair I sit in every day. Someone suggested to me not long ago that I needed a different chair. Not on your life. I don't sit there without sweet scenes floating through my mind. I thought of Miller Byne and his great love for missions and Emmet Grimsley who put in his finger in my face one day and said "Preacher, don't ever apologize again about talking about giving." I

thought of my friend Harold Rowland and his wonderful impact on my life. There was a time when he could make things very hard for me and he showed his heart and soul by doing the opposite. Church people. All of you. All of us.

1 Thessalonians 2:17 begins a section that is all about Paul's relationship to the church in Thessalonica and their relationship to him; this section takes us to the end of chapter three. These three verses are the introduction to this section and they show us how Paul sees the people in this church and thus how we ought to see each other in the church. He gives us here three essential characteristics of church people, three realities that are present in the lives of all genuine believers that are both an internal and external witness that we really do belong to Jesus. Here is the first one: we deeply desire to be together as the people of God, 17. The phrase "torn away from you" is the translation of one word in the original and it is the word from which we get "orphaned." Paul is here describing the feeling that is present in every believer when we can be with the people of God in the worship of God, in the work of God, and in the witness to God. This is what we feel when we are not with the people of the church. We feel like a child who has been separated for some time from his parents; what do you think happens when that child is able to be reunited with his parents? What are the emotions? This is what Paul is sensing in his relationship to his brothers and sisters in the church in Thessalonica.

He goes on to say that his absence from them is not due to lack of desire and then he piles up words that can in no way be captured in English to show how deep and desperate is his desire to be with them in the worship of God. And add to this that Paul's return to Thessalonica would be at least at the risk of jail if not at the risk of his life. But he counted his life as nothing when it came to coming together with the people of God in the church for the worship of God and the work of God. It is the deepest desire of every born again believer. Is it for you? The Bible uses the images of the family and the household to describe the character of the church, and we are called the sons and daughters of God, and brothers and sisters with Jesus who are called and compelled to come together by the Spirit of God. I knelt before God this past Wednesday morning and said, "God, I love Wednesdays. I love how they begin and I really love how they end. I love to sit in your presence and soak in Your Word as I write for Sunday and then to end it with the laughter and love of my brothers and sisters as we eat natural and spiritual food together." When Anne and I were at the marriage retreat and

had a such a great time, I told her when we got back that she ought to stay at home and rest but she felt as I did, we could not wait to get back to church and be with our family. It is the desire of all who are devoted to Jesus. It is a most clear and consistent witness of the reality of our commitment. This witness does not lie.

But there is a second thing here that must be noted: Satan wants to disrupt and destroy our relationships with one another. Three words at the end of verse 18 make the point. Paul makes it plain that his deepest desire was to come to them but SATAN STOPPED US. The word for “stopped” is a military term that addresses a strategy that the enemy uses. The word is very specific in terms of the military strategy of the enemy. This is what it describes: an army is marching toward victory and the enemy in order to stall the victory either breaks up the road in front of them so that it cannot be crossed or they dig a ditch that has to be covered before the army can move forward. Either way the goal of the enemy is to divert the focus of the forces so that their eyes are removed from the goal. Most scholars agree that Satan was hindering Paul coming to Thessalonica because of what Jason did when he compromised with the government for what he thought was in the best interests of Paul. Do you remember when Paul preached in Thessalonica, he created an uproar? The whole city was stirred up by the Gospel and against its preacher. He had to leave town. They let him leave town because Jason in whose house he was staying compromised with the secular authorities by paying a fine with what seems to be the promise that Paul would not be back in town. This compromise saved lives but severed the preacher from his people. Compromise with the world often gives the external appearance of being the right thing to do; it never is. Because it is the world system over which Satan is in control and through which he works.

The Bible says that Satan who is our adversary who is the devil a term that means one who wants to divide us in our loves and loyalties is very limited in what he can do, but very influential in doing it. Now this what the Bible makes very plain: our enemy the devil or satan appeals to three areas and uses one mental and emotional device. The three areas are the world, the flesh, and his own way. The device is to get us to doubt the Word of God. Did God really say? He distracts us from our commitment to the church by appealing to what our flesh desires that finds fulfillment in the ways of the world and he moves us in that direction emotionally, and then he gets us to doubt the Word of God as the

absolute Truth of God. Two things result: first we begin to see the church as a function we fulfill rather than a family to which we belong and we decide how we are going to fulfill that function and we get here we are already at the place that we choose how and when to be involved based on what brings gratification to us and when our involvement does not interfere with what we are already involved in the world. An ok place to be today would be to recognize that Satan is hindering you from the investment of your life in and with your church family in ways that reveal your love for God and His people; But if your investment is minimal and you sit here ok with that; the church is not your problem. You have much deeper issues that need to be addressed that have to do with the reality and the integrity of your relationship to Jesus.

One last thing: Listen to the intensity of the words of affection in verse 19: hope, joy, crown, glory. Paul says in this verse that he is looking forward to the return of Jesus and what gives him joy, what brings him glory, what births him a great anticipation for the future and the victor's crown is the church. Do you know what Paul is saying, "I may not get to see you again on this earth; I want to see you; I long to be with you, but we will be together forever in glory." Is that how we feel toward each other? Should it be? You have heard the old saw: "to love above with the saints we love, now that will be glory; but to live below with the saints we know, now that is a different story." But I can assure you that if we do not long to be together here with this society of salty saints, then it is highly unlikely that we will dwell among them in heaven above. If Jesus loved the church enough to die for her, then those who belong to Him will love her enough to live in it and through it to make His life and love known to the world.

Could we say about this church, about each other as church people today that it is our being together in the worship of God, doing the work of God, and giving witness to God that is our glory and our joy? Even with our frustrations and irritations, our aggravations and imperfections; it is the church for which Jesus gave His life and it is church that He will one day take home. And those who are in it then are in it now—and love it. Thank God for church people.