

Signs of a Healthy Church

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- [0 : 00] Well, good evening folks, as has been mentioned, my name is Alistair, the privilege of being the assistant pastor here at Brunsfield and this evening it is my joy to be leading us through the first installment of 2nd Thessalonians.
- I have had a wonderful week in this text and I hope that as we study it together, you will be blessed as well. Now, according to the World Health Organization, an organization we've got to know a little bit more over the last few years, the official definition of health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being.
- Now, maybe when you heard that, you thought, yeah, that's not me at all. Health isn't always easy to gauge, is it? And by such a broad definition, it's actually really hard and it's really difficult to gauge our own health as people who maybe aren't medically trained.
- And so the website Business Insider spoke to doctors and dieticians and asked them what are some of the general signs to indicate someone is in good health.
- Here are just a couple of the things they came up with. Number one, you eat when you're hungry and you stop when you're full. Number two, you can make it up two flights of stairs and feel pretty good.
- [1 : 17] Three, you embrace your full range of emotions. Four, you can wake up without an alarm clock. And five, you have all the energy to do all the things you want to do.
- Now, if you're like me, you look at that list and you laugh. But joking aside, we can tell, generally speaking, can't we, when our bodies aren't healthy. We can feel when things aren't right and we see markers of when we need to think about going to the doctor.
- There are signs of what a healthy body looks like. Well, the same is true for the church, which is described in the Bible as the body of Christ, the body of believers.
- So while the church is different from a physical body, in many ways, there are some similarities. The body has many parts that each work in unison to help you walk and talk and go about your day-to-day lives.
- Each part has its role to play. And the same is true for the church, isn't it? Each member of the global and local body of Christ has their own part to play and their own gifts given to them by God.
- [2 : 25] And like our bodies, there are signs of what a healthy church looks like. In our passage this evening, that's what we're coming to. We see four different signs of a healthy church.
- As we go through this passage together, I want us to think about whether this is the kind of local church we are striving to be. And whether this is the kind of church culture that we are trying to cultivate as individual members of this church.
- But before we dive into the specifics of the first five verses of 2 Thessalonians, we need to take a bit of a step back and think about the context of this book. So whenever you come to any book of the Bible, we need to ask ourselves at least three questions.
- Who wrote the book? Who was it written to? And what was the context of the first audience? So if you have 2 Thessalonians open in front of you, you'll see from verse 1 that the authors of this letter are Paul, Silas and Timothy.

Paul being the main author. And they're writing this letter to the Christians in Thessalonica, just at the top left of that map on the screen.

[3 : 41] This was one of the largest cities in the northern part of modern day Greece, Macedonia at the time. And we get to know the context of Thessalonica from Acts chapter 17.

Now you don't need to turn there, but I'll read a few verses. Paul and Silas were there and they had quite a successful time. Acts 17 verses 2 to 4 say this. As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue.

And on three Sabbath days, he reasoned with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah, he said.

Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women. So Paul goes into Thessalonica and preaches Jesus in that city for three weeks.

And within three weeks, a Christian community comes together, both Jews and Gentiles. People from different backgrounds, different worldviews, different cultures, different social classes, gathered as one community, united in their love for Jesus and their hope in the gospel.

[5 : 00] But a group of Jews were furious at the message of Jesus. And so they formed a mob and Paul with his companions were forced to leave Thessalonica.

But you can take Paul out of Thessalonica, but you can't take the Thessalonians out of his heart. See, Paul longs to hear how this church is doing.

And so he sends Timothy to them. We read about that in 1 Thessalonians chapter 3. Then he sends the letter of 1 Thessalonians, followed shortly after by 2 Thessalonians.

So it was written by Paul. It was written to the Thessalonians. But why? Well, because this church was being attacked on two sides.

One attack was coming from outside. These Christians were being persecuted by the world around them. It had become worse since Paul's first letter to them, just potentially as few as a few months earlier.

[6 : 04] Now they weren't just being shunned by society. They weren't just being looked at with suspicion. The world around them was looking for ways to physically harm them.

The persecution had amped up. Paul saw a glimpse of that himself in Acts 17, but it had only gotten worse. So that's one attack against them.

But the second war front that they had was more subtle, but more dangerous. And it was coming from within. There were people in this church who were teaching lies about the second coming of Jesus and the timing of when and how it would all happen.

These false teachers were making people doubt the truth, casting doubt on Paul's teaching and contradicting what he said. And so this whole letter is from the Apostle Paul, who loves these people dearly.

And he's writing to encourage them, to remind them of truth, and to spur them on to continue growing in light of the return of Jesus Christ, their Lord and Savior.

[7 : 10] So that's the letter as a whole. Why then does Paul start with four signs of a healthy church? Well, he is encouraging them that this is already happening amongst them, and he's helping them see that God is at work in their lives, even in all the difficulties they face.

And so from these verses, we'll see what a healthy church looks like, and in turn, we should see the kind of church we should be striving to be at Brunsfield Evangelical. So the first mark of a healthy church is growing faith.

Do you see that in verses one to three? Growing faith. Now Thessalonica was a strategically important city for the Roman Empire. It had a port on the Aegean Sea, and it was located on the Ignatian Road, a road that stretched just under 700 miles, connecting tons of little cities across the Roman Empire.

So thousands, if not tens of thousands of sailors, travelers, immigrants, were making their way in and out of Thessalonica on a regular basis. Therefore, Thessalonica was a strategic place for gospel growth.

And I think Paul and Silas and Timothy knew that if the gospel took root in that city, the potential for gospel growth would be amazing. And so Acts 17 happened.

[8 : 37] But then we turn to Paul's second letter to this church, and look how it begins with me in verse one. Paul, Silas, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace and peace to you from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Now we can often skip over these initial verses of New Testament letters, but Paul starts by focusing on God.

He's highlighting their connection as fellow believers who all have the shared privilege of calling God their Father. And he sends them a greeting with grace and peace.

Grace given by God. That grace results in their relationship with God through Jesus, and peace is a result of that grace. Peace with God.

This means that all Christians have been granted access into the family of God, his church. And as a family, we have one Father.

[9 : 40] The one who loves us, who brings us together, and encourages us to gather with one another and worship Jesus. Now if we miss this point, that the whole focus of this letter is God, and Jesus, and the gospel, then we miss the whole letter.

Because this is the foundation. This is the wonderful union between God and his people through Jesus Christ. That is the focus. And from there, Paul goes on to encourage the church, doesn't he?

In verse 3, read that with me. We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more. Now at first glance, it seems that Paul is saying that he feels obliged to give thanks for the Thessalonians.

But you get a sense that after all Paul has seen, he just can't help but thank God for them. It's like he's saying, I've heard the stories of the oppression you face.

I know the things you go through every single day, and I cannot help but thank God because you are growing every single day. Imagine what an encouragement that would be to this church.

[10 : 52] Constantly coming under fire, being persecuted left, right and centre, probably wrestling with their doubts, maybe even thinking, is this really worth it? With temptations around every corner, constant pressures, doubting whether they could carry on, Paul says, we thank God because despite all of that, you are continuing to grow.

And the growth isn't small either. They aren't like a flower that you've planted in the spring and you're unsure whether it's actually growing or not. Something often grows so slow that maybe if you're like me, you're either googling whether you've killed it or you're taking pictures to see if it's actually growing at all.

But the ESV translates verse 3, it translates it a little bit better and says that the church's faith is growing abundantly. Their growth is like that of a little child.

One day it's born tiny and defenceless. It can do nothing by itself. And yet within the blink of an eye, that wee boy or wee girl is running around like mad.

Come into church after a Sunday morning service and you'll see kids running around playing together. It's wonderful to see and it's crazy because some of them weren't even born when we first came to this church five years ago.

[12 : 13] And now they're proper little children. That's like the faith of these Thessalonians. Despite their circumstances, they were growing in their faith.

And Paul is recognizing that God is at work in the lives of these Christians. Their growth isn't down to Paul. It isn't down to anything that he has done specially, but it is down to God and his work.

One mark of a healthy church is the growing of their faith. Can we say that about our church? Can we say that about ourselves as individuals?

It's often really hard to see growth in the moment. But I would encourage each of you to think this evening when you get home, look back over the last three years of your lives.

Do you notice a difference in your knowledge of God? In your love for him? In your trust and dependence on him every single day? Our desire as Christians should be to grow, to become more like Jesus every day.

[13 : 19] That is the work of the Spirit in our lives. But there are also things that we can do to help grow our faith. We can do simple things like reading our Bibles every day.

Actually wrestling with the text, not just treating it like a tick box exercise or the daily reading plan done for the day. Reading God's word and trying to dive deep and understand more of what he wants to communicate to us.

And marvel at the creator we have and how good he is. We can gather with our brothers and sisters at church, yes, on Sunday, but also throughout the week to read the Bible together and encourage one another.

We can read good Christian materials that help us grow in our knowledge of God and the Bible. Now let me challenge us as a church and as individuals. Are we taking steps of faith?

Trusting in God that he will provide everything we need? Are we growing in our faith or are we trusting in ourselves? Relying on God and trusting in his provision on a daily basis will help grow our faith.

[14 : 34] Now these are practical things that we can do to grow our faith, but the primary way our faith grows is that we run to God in utter dependence and ask for him to constantly do a work in our lives.

Our prayers should be that Jesus becomes more precious to us day by day and that we grow in his likeness and that the Holy Spirit would transform our hearts.

So the first sign of a healthy church is that they have growing faith. The second sign of a healthy church is increasing love in verse 3.

Increasing love. Now put yourself in the situation of this church. Surrounded by danger, attacks coming from outside and within, where would you find comfort?

Yes, you find comfort in the gospel, the knowledge that Jesus lived the perfect life, that he died the death that we deserve on the cross, and that one day he's coming back.

[15 : 34] That is the knowledge that spurs them on and grows their faith. But they would also want comfort on the day-to-day as they gather with one another, wouldn't they?

As they express their love for one another in church, they increase in their love for one another. Now maybe you've heard it said before that the church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints.

When you're ill, when you have wounds that need tending to, you go to the hospital, you go to a doctor, the people who are medically trained to care for your body.

But where do you go when you're emotionally ruined? Who are the people you turn to when you're spiritually struggling? Who are the people you run to when you're at your wits end and you just need comfort?

The answer, I hope, is the Lord's people. The church should be a loving community of believers who gather around you and care for you as they point you to Christ.

[16 : 42] Look at verse 3. We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more and the love all of you have for one another is increasing.

Now this was a church community who were different from each other, different backgrounds, different cultures, different day-to-day lives. And yet as they gathered together to celebrate the Lord, they grew in their love for one another.

They grew in their care for one another. Now why is this love that we have for each other so vital for the health of a local church? Well this is what Jesus says about love in John 13, 34-35.

A new command I give you, love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.

Jesus shows us how faith and love work together. Faith is our response to the gospel, our response to Jesus' invitation to become his disciples and to follow him.

[17 : 56] And love is the proof that our faith is real. Love is faith worked out in the day-to-day of the Christian life. Now I don't think it's a coincidence that so many people have been drawn to see the good news of Jesus as beautiful and true because they've seen disciples loving one another.

Or they've been recipients of the sacrificial love of people born out of their faith in Christ. An example of this is Rosaria Butterfield.

She's a well-known Christian writer and speaks a lot about Jesus today. But she was previously lost and tangled up in all the things that this world has to offer.

And the thing that started her journey of faith was simply that an older Christian couple invited her round for dinner. They showed her consistent love and started reading the Bible with her after meals and answering questions.

What changes the lives of so many broken, hurting people today as they walk through the doors of churches and as they walk into homes of Christians? Well, it's the fact that they receive a loving, warm welcome and that they are pointed to the only place where true and lasting hope is found in Jesus Christ.

[19 : 20] Is that the kind of church that we are? We are constantly increasing in our love for one another. Now, I must say that a lot of this does happen and often it goes on behind the scenes.

Sabina and I have personally experienced the love of this church, which is one of the reasons we're finding it so hard that we're leaving in a couple of months. When one of the...

We can't become comfortable where we are in our love. We need to constantly grow. We should be striving to increase our love for one another.

So let me challenge us. What does this look like on a Sunday morning? Are we the people who sit in the pew expecting to be part of a loving family but arrive late and leave early?

Or we maybe only come to church every couple of months when it's convenient. Also think about how active you are in increasing your love for the whole church.

[20 : 22] On a Sunday, it's so easy to sit in the pew and do nothing, speak to no one. Expect others to come to us instead of us going to them. And think about who we speak to on Sundays.

Do we go towards those who are only like us or do we go to everyone? We should be intentionally approaching people of different ages and stages as an expression of our love for the whole church family.

That is how we grow, we increase in our love for one another. And I think we need to think honestly. How confident are we that as a church family, if someone were in trouble or if they were stuck in a situation, how comfortable would they be to approach us as a church and ask for help?

How do we react to those who come to us who are struggling in life? To be a church that is increasing in love, we need to pray more for the people of our church.

Invest time in getting to know those around us, having people around for meals, helping those who struggle, praying for those who are hurting, being a shoulder to cry on on a Sunday when people are hurting, being support in times that are hard and being a companion in both good and bad.

[21 : 48] All of that will produce in us a deeper love for one another. And it will be a witness to those around us as well because we're different. Why else would we all be in this room tonight?

Different backgrounds, different cultures, different languages, different social classes, and yet united and bound together in Jesus and increasing in love for one another.

That is the second sign of a healthy church. And the third sign of a healthy church is perseverance in trials in verse 4. Read verse 4 with me.

Therefore, Paul says, among God's churches, we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.

So a growing faith will produce an increasing love for those around you and it will produce in you an internal hope and trust in God that will help you stand firm in the face of persecutions and trials.

[22 : 53] Paul says that this church is an example of what it means to persevere under persecutions and so he's boasting about them to other churches, using them as an example, not boasting in a negative sense but giving them credit where credit is due.

The word used for persecutions is quite specific and it means that there were people actively trying to harm the Christians. And the word for trials is more general.

It includes different kinds of sufferings and it obviously includes persecutions as well. Now these persecutions and trials were producing in them more faith and perseverance.

I remember reading a few years ago the story of Richard Wurmbrand in a book called Tortured for Christ. If you want a copy speak to me afterwards. Richard was a pastor in Romania under communist rule.

He was arrested for preaching the gospel, beaten and tortured for his faith and yet he refused to stop preaching the gospel to the other prisoners. So they put him in isolation because they couldn't shut him up.

[24 : 05] But even there prisoners remarked how he would simply shout his appeals for people to put their trust in Jesus from a distance. Even there people could hear him sing songs of God's goodness and God's majesty and they kept having to change the prison gods because they all wanted to know more about this man Jesus.

How could the Thessalonians endure such persecution? How could Wurmbrand stand firm in the face of torture? Well they stood firm because they viewed their sufferings in light of the eternal hope that they have in Christ.

Paul knew this to be true himself as he writes in 2 Corinthians 12 9-10 he says I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses so that Christ's power may rest on me.

That is why for Christ's sake I delight in weaknesses in insults in hardships in persecutions in difficulties for when I am weak then I am strong.

this is an attitude that sees the persecution and trials not simply as things to patiently endure but as opportunities to grow in our trust and love for Jesus.

- [25 : 25] One final example of this is the persecution of the early church. In the second century killing Christians had become a bit of a sport. A spectacle for all to see branding Christians as criminals to be hated but it wasn't working.

In fact it was actually having the opposite effect of what Rome wanted. People weren't growing in their hatred for Christians but they were joining them instead. Here's what Tertullian an early church father said We are not a new philosophy but a divine revelation.

That's why you can't just exterminate us. The more you kill us the more we are. The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church because those who see us die wonder why we do.

For we die like the men you revere not like slaves or criminals and when they find out they join us. This church is surrounded by a storm of persecution but instead of being blown away they are strengthened by Christ their anchor who holds them firm in him.

Now are we a church who perseveres in trials? Suffering persecution and trials is never easy.

- [26 : 46] The Bible is clear on that. We don't make light of suffering but how we respond matters. We can either run away from suffering and seek to live a life of peace and comfort.

a life where we don't speak up for or about Jesus or we can see our trials in light of eternity and use them to help us grow in Christ likeness.

We may not be suffering the blows of persecution like other of our brothers and sisters are around the world but we are suffering.

we are facing trials nonetheless and in those trials in whatever form they come we must stand firm in our faith. See our trials from an eternal perspective and remember that we have an anchor and a hope that is safe and secure and his name is Jesus.

a healthy church perseveres in trials. And the final sign of a healthy church is that they are counted worthy in verse 5.

- [27 : 57] Read verse 5 with me. All this Paul says is evidence that God's judgment is right and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God for which you are suffering.

Now we have difficulty today understanding why God uses sufferings and trials and pain to accomplish his greater purposes. We look at suffering mostly from an earthly perspective rather than an eternal one.

But God can often use pain and suffering, trials and hardships for us to grow and to prepare us for an eternal glory and to produce in us something that is far more wonderful than we can see in this life.

Paul is reminding this suffering church that their suffering is under the hand of a good God and that it can be used as a tool to push them into further dependence on him.

It's not that their suffering makes them worthy of the kingdom of God, only Jesus can make that possible, but they are counted worthy for the kingdom of God because they are persevering in their sufferings for the name of Jesus.

- [29 : 12] All the sufferings that these Christians were enduring is evidence to the watching world that they live for something else, that they live for someone else and therefore as they suffer and endure, their faith in Jesus shines all the brighter.

Ultimately, Paul is saying that all the suffering you're going through right now, all the suffering that you're facing because of your faith in Jesus is producing in you more faith and dependence on Jesus which will result in you arriving in glory and hearing those life-giving words well done, good and faithful servant.

It's similar to what Paul said to the Romans in Romans 5, 3-5. But we also glory in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance. Perseverance character and character hope and hope does not put us to shame because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

From the moment we become Christians, God begins a work in us by God the Spirit of shaping and molding us to become more like Jesus and oftentimes God can use suffering to do that.

every Christian can be certain that the suffering they are going through for their faith is not meaningless but it is producing in them something far greater and preparing them for the eternal glory that awaits them in Jesus.

[30 : 53] Friends, as you go through this life, endure all things with the knowledge that you have a future that is secure in Jesus. Nothing can take that away.

That through his death and his resurrection you have been reconciled to God and that even the sufferings of living in a world that hates God and hates his people are preparing you for the day where you will meet him face to face in the glorious new creation.

The sign of a healthy church is that they are counted worthy of suffering for the name of Jesus. Jesus. I think back to where we started off with some doctors and dieticians who've come up with different signs that point to the general health of an individual.

The Bible, in the Bible we see signs of what a healthy church looks like and that is a picture we should be striving for as a local church family. We should be looking to see these signs in our own lives as individuals too.

Let us strive to be a church and a Christian who is growing in faith, who is increasing in love, who is persevering in trials and who will one day be counted worthy as they, as we enter into eternity with God our Father.

[32 : 17] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this letter of 2nd Thessalonians. Thank you for all the things that it will teach us, for all the challenges that it will bring.

And Father, I pray that as we go through this series that you would be lifted up, that you would get all the glory and that it would help us to be better disciples and a better church that constantly points people to you.

Jesus, would you help our faith grow? Would you help us love one another more? Would you help us persevere in trials? And would you give us hope, certain definite hope, that on that day we will see you and we will be counted as worthy because you have kept us by your faithfulness.

We pray this for the upbuilding of your kingdom and in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.