



Sermon Growth Guide

August 24, 2025

Find your People

1 Thessalonians 1:8-2:6

Key Verse: 1 Thessalonians 2:4b “We are not trying to please people, but God, who tests hearts.”

Big Idea: Gospel sincerity is the foundation of true community and witness.

Foundations

Community is hard. Most of the time, we are waiting for the “magic” of that unnamable something that creates friendships. The need for a little magic never really goes away, but in the body of Christ, we should intentionally make sincerity in the Gospel the foundation of our small groups.

In today’s passage, Paul ends his commendation of the extraordinary faith of the Thessalonians, and begins a defense of his sincere ministry in Thessalonica. The Thessalonians’ faith is preaching without words. They’ve changed. They showed true hospitality to Paul and his companions. They no longer serve idols, but the living God. Their hope in Christ is visible to everyone.

The foundation of this extraordinary little community is the Gospel. And the Gospel was preached by Paul and his companions with sincerity. They weren’t in it for greed or gain. They didn’t come with impure motives, and they weren’t discouraged by the suffering and opposition they faced in past cities or in Thessalonica itself. Contrary to what we might imagine, this community was founded by missionaries who weren’t trying to please other people, but God, who tests our hearts.

The theme of our “Belong” series today is: “Find your people.” As we open our communities to others, we remember that the Gospel is the foundation of our fellowship. We welcome others the way Paul approached the Thessalonians: with sincerity and love, sharing our lives together (v. 8). We do this not to please others. We love, because God first loved us. (1 John 4:19)

Understanding God’s Word

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:8 - 2:6 together. Reading verses 7-8 might help with context.

What is the evidence for the sincerity of the Thessalonians faith and of Paul’s ministry?

Paul might have been defending his ministry against accusations during his absence. What might those accusations have been?

Applying God’s Word

When you reach out to others in community or in sharing the Gospel, what are your motives? It might take a little bravery, but ask the Holy Spirit to help you answer honestly. What do you think a community founded on the sincerity of the Gospel looks like?

Witnessing God’s Word

In many ways, this passage is primarily about the results of sharing the Gospel with integrity. What are the results of you or our church sharing the Gospel? Does the evidence reveal the integrity of you and our church? Are there any ways that you can grow in sharing the Gospel with integrity, just as Paul and his ministry partners did? How can our church grow in this way?

Find your people to grow with, to grow alongside. Christianity is not a lone wolf sport. Lone wolves don't eat. Wolves hunt together. So do dolphins. So do lions and killer whales. It's fun to watch how they operate, if you can tolerate the ending. If they don't hang together and work together... it's amazing how the whales coordinate their movements, and the dolphin pods corral these schools of fish. God wired them up to work together. It's in their genes. You could raise a dolphin in a fish tank at Sea World, let them out in the wild, they start doing this right away. Why is it so hard for us? We are the opposite. We know we need to be in community, we know we need to be part of a team, but we resist it with all we've got. Our smartphones are a little loneliness makers, do you know that? Little lonesome makers. You disappear into them and think you are connected. We want to help you Belong here at church. Three simple steps. Last week, find your Pattern for worship. Pick a service. Every Sunday morning at 8:30/9:00/10:00/11:00 you find me right here. It's the first thing on my calendar. Today, Find Your People. Find the people you will grow with. We learn in rows; we grow in circles. Find your people.

We need a team. There are so many illustrations pastors use. The redwoods. I think I remember Jennifer Holz talking about the redwoods of California. They grow 100 feet up, but their roots are like 6 feet deep. Wouldn't a good wind knock them over? Yes. If they stood alone. But they don't stand alone. They stand together. Which would you prefer? Alone or together? Think of a football team. Let's imagine you are a linebacker for the Denver Broncos. Now, this is Saquon Barkley [PIC]. Nice enough guy, until he is running at you like this [PIC]. Six feet, 240 pounds, coming at you full speed. If you are a linebacker for the Broncos, you know that on October 5 you have an appointment. It is your job on that day to put your body in front of that about eighteen times. If that was my job, I would be interested in forming a team.

Wouldn't you? I mean, if I had to face that, well, I'd probably look for another job. Indeed. com. But if I had to do it, I'd want to know I have a team to face it with, wouldn't you? Sometimes we know what's coming. I'll be in surgery for a new knee on such and such a date. I'll be retiring on such and such a date. You can call your team together. Your people. Most often, you don't get the warning. It just comes like a sudden storm. And then, have you formed your team? Have you found your people? "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up." (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10)

The church in Thessalonica was a model. That's why we wanted to study this letter together. Paul, Silas and Timothy said, "And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia." (1 Thessalonians 1:7) We can look at them. They were faithful to gather for worship. They found their pattern. They continued to meet despite persecution, they gathered and encouraged one another regularly, they kept at it. They belonged to one another, sharing not only the news and teaching of the Gospel, but sharing their very lives as well. What we know about them is that they received the message with joy. "You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit." (1 Thessalonians 1:6) They heard and believed. Then they became imitators. That's discipleship. A student hopes to learn from her teacher; a disciple wants to become the master. Imitation. Apprenticeship. Living life the way the Master lives life. Where are you growing as a disciple of Jesus?

"The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it." (1 Thessalonians 1:8) They were like a bell going off. Their life, their lives together, bore witness to the realities of Christ. Where are you learning to share the message of

the good news of Jesus? Where are you growing as a messenger of Christ? And they were learning. “For they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.” (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10) What you see here is the development of a worldview. As they learned together, they were able to see where they had accidentally attached themselves to idols. That takes information from the outside sometimes. That takes lessons, learning, teaching, reading, until understanding breaks through the cement wall of ignorance that had you tied up worshipping money instead of Jesus, or anything else. They turned from idols. They turned to God. They shaped their future hopes and dreams on what God promised, not the world, “and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.” (1 Thessalonians 1:10) That’s worldview. How do you see the world? What glasses are you looking through? It takes growing with others, learning with others, to develop God-shaped glasses, a godly worldview.

For this, we need faithful teachers. Instructors who are not trying to gain from our need, and who are not trying to please the crowd but will stay faithful to God and his Word. “For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority.” (1 Thessalonians 2:3-6) Faithful teachers.

Belong. Find your people to grow together. We don’t want you playing the lone wolf.

We have a saying around here, one of our values. “Keep Growing.” We say “learn to grow.” That has two meanings. First of all, we believe in learning. We believe there is information you need to thrive in faith. The movements of your heart toward Jesus will only go as far as your knowledge allows. Eventually, if you are not learning the faith, you will find yourself stunted. You will stop growing. And you will easily be pulled off course. You have to learn if you are going to grow. Learn to grow. But also, learn to grow. Have you lost your ability to grow? Do you walk into every room as if you already know everything? Here I am! God’s gift to Presbyterianism! Maybe you still have more to learn. Maybe you need to learn to grow again, to learn to listen again, to come into the room as if you might not have all the answers and you might just learn from those around you, if you stop talking and start listening. Learn to grow. It is interesting to live in the digital age. We assume if we need to know something we don’t know, we can just Google it. Ask ChatGPT. What could possibly go wrong? So we look at the people God has put in our lives and assume we have nothing to learn from them. Learn to grow. Are you learning and living out the faith with others?

We have great teachers here. Today is open house day for all our classes. Sunday mornings we have classes called Adult Sunday Communities. I believe there are fourteen of them. Some of them are for the retired set, others for young adults, young families, older families, etc. You can visit around or get introduced to a teacher today, or this Wednesday at the All – Church Picnic. Times and descriptions are at FirstPresCos.org/belong. See, we are trying to be super practical in this series. We want to make this feel easy. Now, Pathfinders is over 100 people, but most of these are groups of 20 or 30 people. Basecamp with our Young Adults may be 50 or 60. If you are under sixth grade, you belong up on the 3rd floor for Kids Min! Middle School and High School, walk across the street to the Student Center made just

for you. These are rooms to find people and be found by people. But if Sunday morning doesn't work, we also have Bible Studies all week. There are a men's studies in the mornings, Tuesdays and Thursdays, and a large women's study on Tuesdays called Daughters of the King led by one of our Elders Kappy Stewart. Student Min gathers on Wednesday nights too. These are great ways to move from the anonymity of large worship gatherings into a known community. You could also join the choir!

But there is one more step I hope you will take. I don't want to jump the gun on next week's message, but the kind of community we are looking for is the kind where we know one another truly. The authors of this letter said they could exercise authority if necessary, but, "Instead, we were like young children among you. Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well." (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8) A nursing mother caring for her children. That's close. To not only share the Gospel, the message, intellectual insights on the Christian faith, but also we were delighted to share our very lives. To share lives. To know one another. That happens a little bit better when you go to Sunday School, but Life Groups are where we learn to grow the most. Life Groups, where you are known by name, where you pray for one another meaningfully, where you trust one another to apply Scripture to your lives without judgement, where you live out the faith together. Life Groups. We have about 380 people in groups like this. We would love to help you find one or start one. Belong. Find your people.

This has been a momentous week for me and my family, if I can share personally for a minute. Last weekend, my son Jack was married. I shared the Scripture in Ecclesiastes I mentioned earlier: "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls

down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12) Where does three strands come from? God. Jesus binds us together in community. I looked out at the crowd and realized that most of Jack's friends were part of this young adult community here in town that started with the First Pres Fellows. If it wasn't for First Pres Fellows, Jack would not have met his people; he would not have met his person! His wife. I am so grateful for how God binds us together in community. Then yesterday we dropped my son Peter off at college. Taylor University. Today he is finding his people. Learn to find your people.

Alone is no good. God binds us together. It's a three-strand cord. Be grateful for the people God has put in your life. As you step closer and risk relationship, risk getting involved, you will find a place you belong here. Belong. Find your pattern of worship. Find your people to grow together. Make your team today, before the storm comes, as Jesus did. Jesus built his team. "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you." (John 15:12-15) Jesus did not stay far off; he came to be with us. Jesus was estranged so you could belong. Find your people. Belong.