November 15, 2026
2 Thessalonians 1

What is the Gospel? If none of you can answer that question succinctly and accurately, I have failed as your pastor. What is the Gospel? It's the first lesson that we cover in youth Catechism. It's a part of our identity- we are St. John's *Evangelical* Lutheran Church, the word "Evangelical" and "Gospel" mean the same thing: Good News. The Gospel, strictly defined, is the "good news." It's not advice or rules to follow. It's not instruction on how to live a God pleasing life. It's not a command from God that he requires from us. The Gospel is not advice. It's *news.* It's what Christ has done for us. If I were talking to you on the street corner for five minutes, and you asked me what the Gospel is, I'd say something like this: That although we have disobeyed God and deserve his punishment, Jesus, God's Son came to live a perfectly obedient life in our place, died in our place, and rose from the dead to prove that his death truly satisfied the justice that we deserved, and I'd tell that person, "Believe the Gospel!" Trust this message! But there's more to it than that! The Gospel includes everything that God has done, is doing, and will do for us. The teaching of predestination, or election, that if you are a Christian, it's only because God chose you to be his own before the world was created. That's good news- God chose you! The teachings about Baptism- that through water and the Word God grants us forgiveness and eternal life, it's free! That's good news! The Lord's Supper- that in this meal, Christ unites with us, feeds us, nourishes us, embraces us, forgives us, gives us comfort and peace and joy. That's good news! The Work of the Holy Spirit- that he dwells within us, keeps us in Faith, strengthens us, opens our eyes, helps us grow to be more like Christ, helps us endure trouble and hardship, that God not only saved us, but is now pruning, strengthening, helping us through this difficult life. That's good news! And, Jesus Christ is going to come back and bring absolute, damning, condemning, ruthless, inescapable wrath, punishment, and eternal Hell. No one will get away with anything, ever. That's… good news? Yes. Yes. Paul in this letter to suffering, hurting Christians presents God's ruthless, endless justice as sweet, comforting, good news. That's the theme for today: **God is Just (And That's *Good* News).** And this good news enables us to **1. Grow, 2. Know, and 3. Go.**

1. We Can Grow. Paul opens his letter to the Thessalonian church, an inexperienced, but faithful group of Christians and says, "I must thank God for you." "You guys are doing so well, that even if I didn't want to, I'd still have to thank God for you. That's how well you're doing!" Wow! What would make Paul say such a thing about a church? What makes a church truly healthy and strong? It's not their pastor's charismatic personality. It's not that they have the best, most cutting edge worship or the fanciest amenities. What is it that makes him thank God for the Thessalonian Christians? They are growing. In membership? Probably, but that's not it. They are growing in faith, and they are growing in love. What does that functionally look like? It means you are more in love with God's Word, more excited to study it than you were a year ago. It means you are more equipped to answer hard questions about the faith than you were a year ago. It means you are more in love with Christ, taking more comfort from the Gospel, and are more excited about

everything God has done, and will do for you, than you were a year ago. It doesn't mean you're perfect! It doesn't mean you don't have bad days. But it does mean that when you do fall, you do stumble, you are more willing to repent, and more thankful for God's forgiveness and mercy, more thankful for your salvation, than you were a year ago. As a whole, if our people are more excited about the Gospel, more peaceful about the world, more reliant on God's Word and promises, more equipped to share their faith than a year ago, that's a sign of health! Also, growing in love! That means you are a more patient, faithful spouse than you were a year ago. That means you are more generous with your wealth, time, and energy than you were a year ago. That means you are more gracious, less bitter, less angry, less apathetic than you were a year ago. That means you are gentler with people, but more courageous and willing to say hard things. That means you are kinder, more willing to be associated with unpopular people than a year ago. That means you are more concerned about what you can do for others, than what others offer you than you were a year ago. It means you are quicker to apologize for your wrongs, and quicker to forgive other people's wrongs than you were a year ago. This growth is absolutely necessary- it's not optional. Christians are called to grow. Also, Christians are not called to do this by their own power- it's something God does in us through his Word, and, surprisingly enough, suffering.

Outwardly, this church wouldn't have looked like they were thriving. They were being oppressed by their government- their property was being seized, their loved ones were being imprisoned and publicly beaten, their family and friends were shunning them, and their lives were hard! They were poor! They were laughed at and mocked. They lost their loved ones, they were sick, they were depressed, they were suffering! And Paul says, "We boast about you. That God is using your hardships to strengthen you, and to prove that you have been declared worthy of God's kingdom." God is Just. And part of God's justice is that he uses our hardships to make us stronger and to prove our faith. "Whatever hardships the CHristian suffers, let them be regarded not as a mark that God is punishing us for our sins, but rather that he is proving our faith… To very many it has been a great blessing to have fallen from an exalted station of wealth or honor… God often sends hardship and removes that which feeds this worldly pride." Because we know God is just, and that he's not punishing us, we can use our hardships, our pains, our failures to grow, to be more honest about our shortcomings, to be reminded of what really matters in this life, to find our true worth not in our money, status, or abilities, but only in what Christ has done for us. God sends hardships to those he loves. That's good news.

2. We can Know. The next few verses sound intense. They are meant to. They are. Christ will return, and those who are abusing the Christians, those who reject God, and don't trust in him (whether religious or unreligious), will be cast into eternal separation from God. First objection: "Pastor, I don't believe in a God that would send people to hell. I believe in a God of love!" My response: "No, you don't." How many of us have been or love someone who has been emotionally, physically, sexually, financially, abused? How many of you are angry about it and want justice to happen, punishment for the abuser? How many of you would be okay with a serial killer walking free? How many of you would be okay with the rulers of the Armenian

Genocide, the Third Reich, the Soviet Revolution- tens of millions of innocent people killed- walking away free? Aren't you angry? Aren't you angry at the dirty, corrupt politicians? Aren't you angry at people who purposely call the elderly to scam them? Aren't you angry at husbands who cheat on or abuse their wives and children? Aren't you angry at pedophiles? Why are you angry? Because you care. If there is no judgement day. If there is no hell. If there is no punishment for people who abuse others. What does that mean? God doesn't care, at least not enough to do anything about it. Look at what Paul says. God will give justice to those who terrorize others. Judgement Day means no one gets away with it. Everyone has to answer for what they've done. Judgement Day means God cares about what happened to the children who are abused and neglected, the women who are raped, the men who are slaughtered. "Okay Pastor, but what about Hell? Isn't that unfair, to give people eternal punishment?" No. It's fair. Look closely at Paul's words: "Cast away from God's presence." Human beings were created to be immortal, and God has created our souls that way. We don't simply stop existing. And God has created us to know, serve, love, and be known, served, and loved by him and other human beings. Hell is not fire. It's worse. It's the cold, painful, terrible existence without God, and therefore without love, without peace, without friendship, without beauty, without laughter, only selfishness, only anger, apathy, bitterness, resentment, hatred. That's what Hell is, and it's absolutely fair. CS Lewis writes: *There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, in the end, "Thy will be done." All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. Those who knock it is opened.* Hell is when God tells people who have been avoiding him, choosing to find their joy, worth, fulfillment in things that are not him, "Okay. Have it your way." There's an example of this. Our President was interviewed on 60 Minutes, and the interviewer said, "Would you forgive your enemies if it meant you could get into Heaven?" And our President said, "No." Would you sacrifice some of your money if it meant you could be with the Lord? Would you wait to have sex until marriage, or give to the poor, or forgive your parents, or love your enemies if it meant you could be with God forever? How many people among us would answer, "No?" That's the clearest example of human nature. I don't want to be near him. I don't trust in his Gospel if it means I can't save myself, I can't define what I want to believe, I can't call the shots in life. God sometimes says, "okay. You don't want me. You won't have me." You can call it harsh. But you can't say it's unfair.

Therefore, we can *know.* We can know that every cry for justice will be answered. We can know that all wrongs will be made right, all abuses will be punished, all secret atrocities will be exposed, all liars will be shown for what they are, God will judge all things. We don't take vengeance. We don't give into anger or hatred toward our enemies and abusers. We pity them. We pray for them. Realize who writes this! It's Paul, the abuser of Christians. Pray that God would bring that person who has hurt you to repent. Because Jesus died for them too! Pray that they repent! Because they certainly won't get away with it. That's terrible, but good news.

3. We can Go. If there is no judgement, then nothing ultimately matters, and God doesn't see the evil people do. If there is a judgement, then he sees everything. And that means he sees not only the evil, but he also sees the good we do. Paul concludes this by saying God will bring our good works to fruition. When we see Christ suffer for us, endure the wrath of God's judgement so we don't have to, and also that in the end, every sacrifice we make, every good work of love and charity that we do, every time we forgive, every time we offer our wealth for the Gospel, every heartbreak we experience, every good work, everything, Jesus sees it. And it will all lead, even if we don't know how, it will all lead to glory. Jesus is glorified in our work- people see our love, our sacrifice, our generosity, our patience, our willingness to forgive, our endurance in pain, our ability to undergo sickness, even death with tearful joy because we know what Christ has done and will do, they must proclaim either here in faith, or at the end with regret, "God is good. God is just." Everything we do is meaningful. Everything we sacrifice makes a difference. If you can't see it now, eventually you will. We all will. And that's really good news. Amen.