



The Reverend Dr. David V. Silvernail, Jr.
1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

June 14, 2009
English Standard Version

“Love that Counts”

This is the 5th sermon in the series on 1 & 2 Thessalonians entitled,
“Life for the Long Haul.”

1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

“But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you—⁷ for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. ⁸ For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. ⁹ For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, ¹⁰ as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith? ¹¹ Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, ¹² and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, ¹³ so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.”

Heavenly Father, we have come to Your Word again this morning and we find that we still need to learn a lot about the Christian life. We don't understand why love and holiness are so important, and why Paul keeps praying for those things. So Lord, once again open our eyes and ears to truly hear and understand and apply this Word to our lives. Do this for each of us, this morning, in His name, and for His glory, Amen.

INTRODUCTION: *Feeling India.*¹

Mike Graham is a PCA Pastor in Mt. Juliet, TN. About eight years ago, he preached here at Potomac Hills while looking for a call after he graduated from Covenant Seminary. He eventually received a call to Hickory Grove Presbyterian Church there in Tennessee, in a small town near Nashville. Mike and his church have developed a partnership with a presbytery in India called Nation2Nation.

And so twice a year he goes over there for several weeks to preach and teach and train pastors. However, he's not going to the major cities where they're used to having foreigners come, but rather, he's going to out of the way country places and living with the people there and eating the same food that they eat.

This works out great for the whole cross-cultural experience, but not so great for the whole digestive system experience. He usually goes through several days of sickness before his body starts to adjust to being in such a different place.

He writes about this in his most recent prayer letter, and he starts off by saying, "James 5 was very real to me in India, especially [the part about] asking the elders to pray over him [the sick], anointing him with oil. I have not been the only one sick this week. However, I was able to get Cipro, and to drink coke, take Ibuprofen for the fever, Imodium for diarrhea, and Pepto Bismol to settle my stomach. So today, I feel much better.

These people were sick, but could afford no medication. All they could afford was a little coconut oil. As much as I complain about insurance and medical cost, we have good medical care at least by comparison to India. In fact it was my pleasure to pray for this anointing with oil, and for healing. It is amazing how feeling the pain and sickness and suffering that others are feeling causes us to be less abstract and more compassionate.

I was equally surprised that a few of these people, who had no money to buy medication, when they would get up, actually put a pittance of money in my hands. It bothered me to take this, but I didn't know what to do. I was praying that they would not see magic in oil, but see the oil as an instrument of healing in the hands of Christ, much like medicine. But I didn't want to dishonor them by not taking it since so many people were gathered round for prayer. By the time I finished, there was 170 rupees next to me. It was just maybe \$3.50 to me, 3 cokes.

But to them, it was far more.

Also, all week Pastor Joachim kept wearing this Scottish plaid looking scarf around his shoulder. I was wondering why wore this colorful scarf, and kept pulling it up around his shoulder. I figured he was just really getting into this Scottish Presbyterian thing. I didn't say anything to him when I would pat him on the shoulder, or vigorously shake his hand in greeting.

At the end, Pastor Joachim wanted me to pray for him ... "What can I pray for you?" I asked. "For my broken arm" he said. And he couldn't afford treatment. Talk about shame and enlightenment and compassion coming together at one time. That ought to teach me the danger of making my quick stupid assessments. I was aghast! Here I was projecting why I might wear a scarf like that for appearances for something silly, when in reality it was his wife's only scarf he was using as a sling.

If that wasn't humbling enough, let me tell you what Pastor Joachim told me. I'm paraphrasing, but this is about what he said: "Two years ago, when you came to teach, you

¹ The Introduction and conclusion are adapted from a prayer letter by the Rev. Michael Graham, Hickory Grove PCA, 6/4/09.

taught on Luke 7, and the adulterous woman at Simon's house." He remembered this teaching in some detail. "Something happened inside of me when you talked about this Gospel that changed my life. So when they said you were coming, I had to come and hear no matter." I couldn't believe it.

I just swallowed my shame and shut up and held his hand more gently now.

Mike went there to teach them about the love of God **with his words** ... they wound up teaching him about the love of God **with their lives**.

And that's what today's passage is all about ... trying to understand what loving Jesus really looks like, and praying that God would bring that kind of love — for Him and for each other — into our lives.

Paul starts by telling us they were ...

v. 6-8: COMFORTED BY THEIR FAITH²

Paul had sent Timothy on a long and difficult journey from Athens back to Thessalonica, a distance of about 200 miles, probably a ten day journey, to see how the believers were doing there. If Timothy stayed there a week to minister to the Thessalonians, and then headed back toward Athens, and beyond Athens to Corinth where he met up with Paul, the whole trip probably took about a month. To Paul, that must have seemed like an eternity.

And now Timothy had come back with the news that they were standing firm in their faith, they had not been moved by afflictions, nor by the devil's temptations. Upon hearing such a great report, Paul wrote these words.

"But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you—⁷ for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith.⁸ For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord."

Paul says in verse seven that Timothy's report brought him such joy and encouragement that even in the midst of his own sufferings, it had lifted his spirits. He says, "***We have been comforted about you through your faith.***" Paul had been attacked, beaten, and jailed in Philippi, persecuted and chased out of town in Thessalonica and Berea, rejected and mocked in Athens — as he would later summarize in **2 Corinthians 11:24-30**, "*Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one.²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea;²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers;²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.²⁸ And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.²⁹ Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness."*

So in the midst of all this, it was **tremendously encouraging** for him to hear Timothy's report, to know that his labor had not been in vain. Rather than bringing bad news that the Thessalonians' faith was wavering, Timothy had brought good news that their faith was bearing

² The Exposition of the text are adapted from the sermons "Stand Fast in the Lord" and "Love and Holiness" by Rev. David Scott, Faith Presbyterian church, Tacoma, WA, 6/3/07 and 6/10/07; *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of The Scriptures* (Volume 2), notes on 1 Thessalonians by Dr. Thomas Constable, pages 698-700; and *The ESV Study Bible*, notes on 1 & 2 Thessalonians, Dr. Colin Nicholl.

spiritual fruit in love. This good news was as thrilling to Paul as the gospel; he used the same Greek word for both messages.

Nothing filled the apostles with joy like news that their converts were “*standing fast in the Lord.*” This was the desired result for all of their ministry ... and they were greatly reassured that this was true for the Thessalonians as well.

And because they were comforted by their faith, they found themselves ...

v. 9-10: **PRAYING FOR THEIR FAITH**

In verses 9-10, Paul is making a point by asking a rhetorical question, “*For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God,¹⁰ as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?*”

The force of Paul’s rhetorical question is, “We cannot **thank God enough for you** because of **all the joy** you have brought to our hearts by your endurance in these trials.” It is noteworthy that Paul thanked **God** for the Thessalonians’ behavior; he didn’t take credit for this. Paul acknowledged that their endurance was really a tribute to the work of God in them as Philippians 2:13 says, “*for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.*” He commended the Thessalonians, but also recognized and acknowledged the hand of God at work in their lives.

Paul gives thanks for Timothy’s great news and then emphasizes his eagerness for a return visit to Thessalonica by telling them just how he’s praying for them. Due to their forced early departure from Thessalonica, the missionaries had been unable to complete their usual round of instruction for the believers there in the fundamentals of the faith. News of the Thessalonians’ perseverance did not relieve Paul of his desire to return to them. Though they were enduring a trial of their faith they still needed more instruction and more growth. Paul wanted to **supply what was lacking in their faith**. The Thessalonians were like tender young plants; their tender roots held them firm against the present storm, but they still needed to grow and mature.

This is the first explicit reference to deficiencies in their spiritual condition— deficiencies due more to immaturity than to waywardness. Up till now Paul described them as having the characteristics of new Christians. Now he said they were deficient in certain respects, as a child is deficient in comparison with an adult. In chapters 4 and 5 Paul will directly address and minister to some of these deficiencies. One particular lack in their instruction related to sexual holiness, which Paul will address in chapter four and Rich is going to preach about next Sunday. Another area in which they needed more instruction concerned the second coming and the final resurrection, which Paul is going to address later in chapter 4 and which we’ll get to in two weeks.

These verses give us another glimpse into the Apostle Paul’s private life. The text says he prayed **night and day ... most earnestly** that God would let him **see them again**. And so he prayed for them. Not only did he pray for their faith, but he also found himself ...

v. 11-13: **PRAYING FOR THEIR LOVE AND HOLINESS**³

“*Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you,¹² and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the*

3 Part of this section is taken from *The Thessalonian Epistles* by D. Edmund Hiebert, page 155.

coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.”

The Thessalonians were already noted for their **love**, but Paul prayed that it might overflow — **increase and abound**— even more. One Commentator writes that “Genuine Christian love . . . is the one thing in the Christian life which cannot be carried to excess.” The image of love overflowing its container suggests that Christian love is something that wells up from within a person naturally. Paul was concerned that it overflow to **everyone**, not just to those in the church. His love for them was to serve as their model.

But increasing their loves wasn’t the only issue Paul addressed. The Thessalonians needed to have their hearts established, essentially meaning that they needed strengthening by God in their inner beings. Notice that Paul didn’t pray that they would be sinless; that’s impossible. He prayed that they would be **blameless**, that is, that after they sinned they would deal with it as God requires and so be free from any charges that could otherwise be reasonably made against them. Before God they should be **holy**, separated **to** God, and separated **for** God. Paul longed that when Jesus Christ would return He would find them **blameless** before men and **holy** before God.

I don’t know about you, but as a child when I would hear the word “holiness,” it was very mysterious to me, a strange word. And especially when someone would point to a particular person and say, “Do you see that man? He’s a holy man.” I didn’t quite know what to make of that, whether that meant that he was part of a secret club, or that he never smiled, or that didn’t like ice cream, or that he was living on some higher level of existence. Holiness seemed to be something distant, something totally removed from ordinary life.

I think many Christians have this sort of view of holiness. Sometimes God’s people see holiness as some esoteric or abstract thing, or as something lofty and unattainable, or something that is so religious and so spiritual that it’s hard to know how it connects with real life. Paul doesn’t see it that way at all. Simply put, he’s trying to tell the Thessalonians, and us, that if you want to be perfected in holiness, **you need to grow in love.**

Good to know. How do we do that? Well, I think there are ...

APPLICATION: Two Critical Commitments⁴

We have seen how Paul responds to his critics. He both defends his visit and explains why he hasn’t been able to return. In the course of this explanation we may discern the two major responsibilities of pastoral ministry for today. But it’s important to note that these two tasks aren’t just for pastors or elders, but I believe they apply to each and every person who claims to be a follower of Christ.

Furthermore, I believe that these two commitments are critical.

- **First comes our commitment to the Word of God.**

In 1 Thessalonians 2, Paul refers to his message three times as **‘the gospel of God’** and twice as **‘the word of God.’** It was Paul’s firm assurance that his message came from God, and that ‘his’ gospel was in reality ‘God’s’ gospel. He hadn’t invented it. He was only a steward entrusted with it and a herald commissioned to proclaim it. He must above all else be faithful.

Every authentic Christian ministry begins here, with the conviction that we have been called to handle God’s Word as its guardians and heralds. We must not be satisfied with **‘rumors of God’** as a substitute for **‘good news from God.’** Of course we’re not apostles like Paul was. But we believe that in the New Testament the teaching of the apostles has been

⁴ The application is largely adapted from *The Gospel & The End of Time: The Message of 1 & 2 Thessalonians* by Dr. John R. W. Stott, pages 68-71.

preserved and is now passed on to us in its definitive form. Jude, the brother of James, writes in his epistle, **Jude 1:3**, “*Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.*”

We are therefore **trustees** of this apostolic faith, which is the Word of God and which works powerfully in those who believe. Our task is to keep it, study it, expound it, apply it and obey it.

- **Second, there’s our commitment to the people of God.**

We have seen that Paul expressed his deep love and care for the Thessalonians by likening himself to their mother and father. He felt and acted towards them as if they were his own children, which they were, since he had introduced them to Christ. So he fed and taught them; he earned his own living so as not to be a burden to them; he was concerned to see them grow into maturity; and he was gentle and sacrificial in all his dealings with them.

Then in 2:17—3:13, which we looked at last week and this week, Paul gives a moving illustration of what he has been writing about. He lays bare his heart bare before them, speaking over and over again of his love for them. He had left them only with the greatest reluctance, and had in fact been torn away from them against his will. He had then tried hard to visit them, but all his attempts had been thwarted. Waiting for news of them, he had found the suspense unbearable and so, though at great personal cost, he’d sent Timothy to encourage them and find out how they were. When Timothy came back with good news, he was overwhelmed with joy and thanksgiving. And all the time he had been pouring out his heart for them in prayer. The fact is that his life was unavoidably bound together with theirs, verse 8, “*For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord.*”

Here, then, is the double commitment of Christians, first to the Word of God and second to the people of God. We are all ministers of the Word and ministers of the church. Another way of expressing the same thing is that the two chief characteristics of ministry are truth and love. It is these which build up the church. **Ephesians 4:15**, “*Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.*”

Yet this combination is rare in the church today. Some people are great champions of the truth and anxious to fight for it, but display little love. Others are great advocates of love, but don’t have an equal commitment to truth, as Jesus and His apostles had. Truth is hard if it is not softened by love, and love is soft if it is not strengthened by the truth.

And if we ask how we may develop these commitments to the Word of God and the People of God, this balanced combination of truth and love, there is only one possible answer, namely by the power of the Holy Spirit, since He is the source of both. He is ‘*the Spirit of truth*’ (John 14:17) and ‘*the fruit of the Spirit is love*’ (Galatians 5:22). Therefore, we have no greater need than for the fullness of the Spirit, who alone can lead us in the single path of truth and love.

So ... What will that look like for us?

There’s no way we can know this side of heaven, but perhaps this story will shed a little light on what that day might be like.

CONCLUSION: *Needing India*

I’d like to finish where we began, picking up again from the prayer letter from Mike Graham, the pastor of Hickory Grove Presbyterian Church. After his humbling experience with Pastor Joachim, Mike goes on to write ...

“Later, Chittibabu, one of the pastors from Lingalopoli (a very remote village where I

thought the dogs would eat me two years ago) came after everything was concluded. I was sitting down in a chair exhausted. I had prayed for a hundred people. The infirmities were overwhelming, and I had no idea. Pastor Chittibabu took my hand and would not let it go. He started shaking and began saying thank you. And then he started breaking, he was trying to hold back, but couldn't. The tears started coming, first a just a little on cheeks, but they coming, and coming, and coming, until he dropped to his knees weeping uncontrollably.

I was speechless. He was thanking me for sharing Jesus with them. He finally looked up, and through the current of tears, said in broken but beautiful English, "We pray for you, and your family, and your church everyday."

When he said it, I believed him.

There were times this week when I have [felt] that when I share the Gospel with these people I feel so out of place. They enjoy the Gospel so much more.

But when I heard Chittibabu say, "We pray for you, and your family, and your church everyday" I knew that it was worth it because I learn so much and can be a better pastor. But more so, it is worth it because we need these brothers and sisters in India far more than they need us.

They help us to see Jesus and worship him."

Those Christian in India **love** Mike, they **pray** for Mike, and they **help** Mike **see** Jesus. And that's what the Apostle Paul is calling us to do. **Love** each other, **pray** for each other, and **help** each other to **see** Jesus.

Think about that. You need to pray.

Take a moment to do that, and then I'll close.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the church in Thessalonica. Thank You for their faithfulness in the face of affliction. Thank You that they received and accepted the Word of God and it changed their lives. May we do the same. And may we demonstrate that change by how we love each other and by how much we pray for each other. We ask that You would do this within us ... in the Name of Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen.

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Philippians 1:9-11

"And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God."