

1 Thessalonians 3:6-13 (1984 NIV)

Increasing and Overflowing Love

⁶ But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you. ⁷ Therefore, brothers, in all our distress and persecution we were encouraged about you because of your faith. ⁸ For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. ⁹ How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? ¹⁰ Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. ¹² May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. ¹³ May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

Introduction

Paul's concern for the well-being of the Thessalonians was palpable. The report of Timothy had been good news for Paul—the Thessalonians continued to be strong in their faith and love.

Paul expressed his need to be with them. Paul is pictured not as a lone ranger, but as one with deep needs for a caring, supporting network of relationships in Christ. He longed for the support of his brothers and sisters in Christ.

The “me” mentality is so prevalent today—trying to find life in self-fulfilment without realizing that lasting fulfilment comes through relating to the needs and growth of others. We need to look and care beyond ourselves.

Paul had every reason to be proud of the good work he had done in Thessalonica. To have introduced the Gospel there in the course of a few days and to have planted a church that was now growing under persecution was no small achievement. Yet for Paul, there could only be thanks to God. He really believed that God alone was the source who sustainer of the life of the Christian community.

Christian community is a spiritual, relational context in which faith in God and His love grow from inside out. The world can see God when they see our faith and love in action.

Paul went before God to pray for the Thessalonians. How do we pray for a church, even a model church like the one in Thessalonica? How do we pray for our church today?

Paul gives us some pointers today.

I. Pray for a specific desire to connect and relate (vv. 10-11).

¹⁰ Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you.

Christian relationships are bound together and built upon in and by prayer. Praying together in groups, praying together in personal relationships, and praying for one another in our own private space is the cement that bonds us in Christ.

In praying specifically to get back to Thessalonica, Paul was modelling an important aspect of prayer. We are often more comfortable with praying in general than praying in specifics. To pray specifically is to bring the details of our lives before God. Paul expressed his honest desire to God. But this does not mean that if he didn't get to Thessalonica, his prayer had not been answered. Rather, Paul was simply committing his desire to God for direction.

To pray in specifics is to open ourselves to God's direction and control. Such prayer is based on the premise that we may or may not be on the right track with our desires. It is not a demand for a specific answer, but a search for God's guidance.

Paul wanted to minister to the Thessalonians—"that we may ... supply what is lacking in your faith" (v. 10). They needed to know a great deal more about the Christian view of the world and of life. Paul wanted to open their eyes to further truths from God.

Paul also prayed to overcome Satanic hindrance—"Our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you" (v. 11). Later accounts reveal that God answered Paul's prayer and he did return to these believers.

Are you finding it difficult to get to where you want to go? Pray that God will open a way for you to the goal you have in mind. Let us not hesitate to bring our specifics to God in prayer. In Paul's case, it was a specific desire to connect and relate with the Thessalonians again.

Obviously, when humans get together you have to have some organization, but organization must always be subservient to community, relationships and mission in the church.

We live in a community-starved world. Mother Teresa once said, "The worst disease in today's world is not leprosy or cancer; it is the feeling of being uncared for, unwanted, of being deserted and alone."

Our response to people's deepest desire for relationships is to tell them that God sent Jesus to come to us so that we can belong to Him.

I once met up with a friend (Nancy) from seminary days. She and her husband were passing by Singapore after having been retired from missionary service by their organization. They were church planters among the Chinese communities all over UK for about 20 years. Nancy shared with fond memories how the Lord had been good to them though it had not always been easy in the field.

But my best memory of Nancy had to do with her coming to the Lord in the earlier years of her life. She was then studying fashion designing in Italy. There, she mixed with bad company. She had a boy-friend who was actually a drug trafficker. Nancy was soon involved in this vice as well.

The whole gang was eventually tracked down and arrested in Rome. Nancy was given a 20-year sentence (she would be hanged if caught in Singapore).

While she was in prison, she struggled with her own self-worth. She felt used rather than loved by her boy-friend. Being in prison far from home, and isolated from family and friends, she lost her sense of belonging to anyone. From the deepest recesses of her soul, she longed for a relationship that she could trust.

One day, the Lord led a Christian to her cell. This person shared the Gospel with her. She heard that there is a personal God who loves her so much that He had sent Jesus Christ to come to her (even to die for her) so that she might belong to Him as His child.

The Spirit of God had prepared Nancy for this encounter with Him. She repented of her sins, asked for forgiveness in Jesus Christ, and received Jesus Christ into her life that day as her personal Saviour and Lord.

Her life began to turn around. Everyone in that prison somehow noticed that she was a changed person. Before long, by the grace of God, she was released from prison for good behaviour after five years and repatriated back to Singapore.

The Lord continued to work in her. Nancy gave her life to serve Him in fulltime ministry. She went to seminary to be equipped for this. That was where I met her way back in 1986. That was where I heard her testimony and it is still my best memory of her until today.

In their time as missionaries, Nancy and her husband had laboured at planting churches, and strengthening relationships and building communities in these churches. Why? It is because they both had experienced and realized that a church could have great impact by modelling relationships and belonging in community as God has intended for His people.

Two ways to model this relational and community life among us so that the world can see our faith and love in action:

- One, treasure the relationships we have with one another in church. Paul wrote much about church in the New Testament—about faith life in the context of God and us and others as well. If we don't believe in that, we are ignoring a huge amount of New Testament teachings!
- Two, cultivate a sense of belonging to this church. See this church as your spiritual family and not just a Sunday hangout!

Indeed, the world can see God when they see our faith and love in action.

How do we pray for a church, even a model church like the one in Thessalonica? Paul gives another pointer.

II. Pray for relationships to increase and overflow with love (v. 12).

¹² May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.

Paul prayed that their love might increase and overflow. There are some who feel that God's love is only reserved for the "lovely"—those who are easy to love, and anyone who falls outside of that line does not deserve to be loved by God nor by His people. But is God's love that limited in scope? Remember that John 13:6 says, "For God so loved the world ..." God's love flows over the walls that some people build. It is God's love that makes Christians distinct from the rest of the people in the world.

The great need for which Paul prayed is the supreme need of every believer—i.e. the need to grow in love; to increase and overflow in love. But note the crucial difference—the love being spoken about is not what the world means by love.

The kind of love here is agape love. The source of this love is the Lord. It is self-giving love and does not come naturally. It is the gift and the work of God.

©2020-2022 John Yuen Ministry

You are permitted to use this sermon or article for free. If you choose to publish excerpts from it, please provide link or attribution back to the version on johnyuen.org.

It will be pure frustration to try and develop this kind of love apart from its only source—i.e. God Himself. It's like trying to find water in a desert where there are no wells or oases. In the same way, agape love is unattainable apart from God.

Paul was not willing that such love be contained within the Christian community. It is to increase and overflow “for everyone else”. How easy it is for us in our groups to become exclusively involved in our own concerns and interests.

This is the point where group life stagnates. Studies on group life reveal that groups need to find avenues of service to others to sustain their vitality. The principle of self-giving love applies to groups as well as to individuals.

The love we are to have is the love that reaches out, overflows and multiplies towards everyone. Everyone includes:

- The unattractive
- The sick
- The poor
- The prisoner
- The sinner
- The opponent

How in the world can we love some of these people? Is it even practical to ask us to love all people? Is it even humanly possible?

No! It is not humanly possible. But there is a way, a source we can look to.

That source of love is the Lord. There is no other source, not for the kind of love that can love all people. This is the reason Paul went before the Lord and requested such a love. Paul knew that it was impossible for him or the Thessalonians to work up the kind of love that could reach out and abound towards all people. A love that could love those who ignore, neglect, abuse, and shamefully treat us could only come from God. This is agape love—the very love of God Himself.

Note some significant features about agape love:

- It is the love of God for the ungodly. It is the love of God for unworthy sinners.
- It is a gift of God. It can be experienced only if a person knows God personally—only if a person has received the love of God into his heart and life.
- It is the love of God which binds us together. In a body of believers unified by love, every believer has a very special part to play in building up the church.
- Only when we are enabled by God with this love can we love all people.

©2020-2022 John Yuen Ministry

You are permitted to use this sermon or article for free. If you choose to publish excerpts from it, please provide link or attribution back to the version on johnyuen.org.

To love as God has loved us is to love others not because of their worthiness, but in spite of their unworthiness.

Joni Eareckson Tada, who was paralyzed in a diving accident as a teenager, once talked about her wedding day.

She said, “I felt awkward as my girlfriends strained to shift my paralyzed body into a cumbersome wedding gown. No amount of corseting and binding my body gave me a perfect shape. The dress just didn’t fit well. Then, as I was wheeling into the church, I glanced down and noticed that I’d accidentally run over the hem of my dress, leaving a greasy tire mark. My paralyzed hands couldn’t hold the bouquet of daisies that lay off-center on my lap. And my chair, though decorated for the wedding, was still a big, clunky gray machine with belts, gears, and ball bearings. I certainly didn’t feel like the picture-perfect bride in a bridal magazine. I inched my chair closer to the last pew to catch a glimpse of Ken in front. There he was, standing tall and stately in his formal attire. I saw him looking for me, craning his neck to look up the aisle. My face flushed, and I suddenly couldn’t wait to be with him. I had seen my beloved. The love in Ken’s face had washed away all my feelings of unworthiness. I was his pure and perfect bride. How easy it is for us to think that we’re utterly unlovely — especially to someone as lovely as Christ. But he loves us with the bright eyes of a Bridegroom’s love and cannot wait for the day we are united with him forever.”

(<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/60046/joni-eareckson-tada-a-quadruplegic-who-was-by-rodney-buchanan>)

Indeed, the agape love of God accorded to us in Jesus Christ is not because of how worthy we feel. The reason is this—in spite of how unworthy we are as sinful people, God still loves us as His created beings. Rom. 5:8 tells us, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

To love as God has loved us is to love others not because of their perceived worthiness, but in spite of their unworthiness. How can we abound in such love for people?

- One, be kind to ourselves—God loves us not because we are perfect in ourselves, but because Christ is perfect in us.
- Two, be thoughtful and considerate to differing views of others.
- Three, be patient and tolerant to difficult people in our lives.

The world can see God when they see our faith and love in action.

How do we pray for a church, even a model church like the one in Thessalonica? One final pointer from Paul is ...

III. Pray for strong hearts of faith (v. 13).

¹³ May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

Paul prayed that the Thessalonians might continue to live righteously until the Lord comes—that he may “strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones” (v. 13).

The word “heart” in the Bible is a general term embracing our capacity to think, feel, and make decisions. It is probably best expressed by the idea of wholeness of inner being. The reality here is that the person who is growing in love in Christ is a person whose total inner being is growing towards wholeness.

“Blameless and holy” is not a term to imply achieving moral perfection. Blameless means they were dealing with what was wrong, not covering it up or pretending it was not there. They dealt with it in their own hearts with God’s spiritual resources, and were thus enabled to turn from evil and walk closely with God.

To be holy is to be set apart by God for His service. Holiness is not an attainment by super spiritual men. Rather, it is the act by which God sets each of us apart for Himself—accepted and loved by God to the very day of Christ’s coming.

It is the Lord Jesus Christ who can make our hearts blameless and holy before God. He alone can free us from the charges of sin. When Christ returns, He will so present all believers blameless and holy—every single one of us—to God.

What a finale—meeting Him face to face and being presented to Him blameless and holy—to be with Him forever and ever! It is the promise of God Himself, and therefore it cannot be stopped! And no man should want to stop it. On the contrary, all men should prepare for and welcome it.

The coming of Christ again is not a matter of speculation but motivation. It is unfortunate when people run from one conference to another on the coming again of Christ, marking their Bibles, drawing their charts, and yet not living their lives to the glory of God, even fighting with one another over when and how Christ will come again.

All Christians believe that Jesus Christ is coming again. They may differ in their views of when and how that will occur. But they all agree that He is returning as He has promised. Furthermore, all Christians agree that this faith in future glory ought to motivate the church. Whatever views they hold, that ought to make a difference in their lives here on earth.

While waiting expectantly for His return, we need strong hearts of faith to stand firm for the Lord in our adversities and difficulties.

God can only grant us strong hearts of faith when we desire to be more and more like Christ.

When I was a lecturer at the Singapore Bible College (SBC), I had a student in his early 40s. About 10 years prior to coming to SBC, he was stricken with cancer.

Just after one term in SBC, he had a relapse. His condition grew worse and he had to drop out of class. When he was at terminal stage, his family moved him to the hospice.

I visited him there. I remember I went into the room to look for him. I saw a man on the bed and who seemed like a total stranger to me. I thought I had entered the wrong room. As I was about to leave, the man called out my name. I recognized that it was the voice of that student.

I turned and looked at him again. I could recognize the voice but I just could not recognize his face. He was so ravaged by the deadly disease that he was literally skin and bones. His hair was all gone, his eyes were deeply sunken into the sockets, and his nasal bone was sticking out sharply from beneath the skin covering his nose.

We talked for a while. He still had a strong heart of faith in the Lord, trusting the Lord to know all things though he himself could not understand why. I left the place being blessed by the thought that he was ready to leave this world bravely to meet the Lord.

Not too long later, he went to be with the Lord. At his funeral, his wife told me that she was with him at his last moments. She said proudly, "He was singing, 'Then sings my soul, my Saviour God to thee; how great thou art, how great thou art!'" He kept singing and praising God till he breathed his last.

When I paid my last respect to him, he looked so good to me—not because the embalmer had done a great job with the make-up, but his strong heart of faith had made him look more and more like Christ.

How can we grow to be more like Christ?

©2020-2022 John Yuen Ministry

You are permitted to use this sermon or article for free. If you choose to publish excerpts from it, please provide link or attribution back to the version on johnyuen.org.

- One, take time to be with God. Listen to and act on His Word, pray to Him, worship Him individually and with others.
- Two, submit to God's will in all circumstances. Let God be first in all our decisions, choices and actions.
- Three, start and finish well the responsibilities God has entrusted us.

Conclusion

Many Christians tend to pray that God will prevent things from happening, whether it be injury, death, suffering or heartache. Unfortunately, there are people who teach us that we have a right to be kept from all trouble. But the New Testament shows us that afflictions are needed in our lives. God does sometimes grant our requests and removes our problems. It is not wrong to pray for this if we also understand that he has perfect freedom to say "No". What Paul tells us to pray for is not that these things be prevented, but that they be used in our lives.

Anything can happen these days—heartache, tragedy, joy, glory. But whatever happens, let us pray that it will deepen our relationships, our love and our faith so that we can have spiritual stability in this troubled and rootless world in which we live.

The world can see God when they see such faith and love in action. God is calling you and me to put our faith and love into action.

Pray that God will help you and me put our faith and love into action today so that He is glorified and someone else is blessed. Amen!