



### *Praiseworthy Positive Correlations*

**2 Thessalonians 1:3-5 We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing. Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring. All this 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.**

My friends I admit that I'm no math whiz, nor am I one who gets too excited by statistics, but it is helpful to realize that there are many things in life that are correlated together. If you exercise regularly and eat a balanced diet, chances are you will live a longer and healthier life. Those two variables are positively or directly correlated. Some things on the other hand are inversely related—more of one yields less of the other—the more cats you have at home, the fewer mice will be around. In these verses Paul reveals that there are several praiseworthy aspects of the Christian life that are positively correlated and go hand-in-hand with each other.

First, the Apostle notes that the Thessalonian's faith and mutual love were super-increasing. Ordinarily faith in Christ is not something anyone can see because by definition faith resides in the hearts of people, but while faith begins in the heart and its ultimate existence or lack thereof is seen by God alone, its effects cannot remain confined to the inner consciousness of the heart, mind, and intellect. As the Apostle James explains elsewhere faith without works is dead, and he maintains, "I will show you my faith by what I do" (cf. James 2:17-18). One reliable gauge of faith in our hearts is an increasing manifestation of love in our lives. As our faith in God grows in depth of knowledge, reliance on God's power, and appreciation of his eternal and all-surpassing love in Christ, that growth shows itself in an increase in love for others. Paul describes how the Thessalonians were showing love "each one of you to one another." What a beautiful picture of love in a congregation! No one was being left out of this communal expression of selfless sacrifice and concern for all the rest!

Secondly in these verses, Paul highlights another positive correlation but one that is more difficult (yes, even impossible) for our sinful flesh to swallow: being in the kingdom of God and staying faithful to his truth brings persecution. The Thessalonians knew this from experience. When Paul had first come to their city, he'd preached in the synagogue for three weeks and won over many Jews and Gentiles by his testimony that Jesus was and is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament messianic prophecies. However, some Jews became jealous--either because Paul was gaining a following or that his gospel made no distinctions between Jew and Gentile and was therefore well-received by many of the Greeks. These enemies started a riot in the city and rifled through houses trying to find Paul, but when they couldn't find him, they seized a prominent believer named, Jason, instead and dragged him into court, accusing him of harboring troublemakers, who proclaimed another king besides Caesar. So the city officials ordered that Jason pay a fee to guarantee that Paul and his missionary team would leave the city. You can read more about this episode in Acts, Chapter 17. But while Paul and his friends had to leave town, the Thessalonian believers were left behind in that hostile environment. In the Greek Paul uses vivid word-pictures to describe what they were enduring: being chased after, pressed down, and suffering great psychological and emotional distress. But that these were happening Paul cites as further evidence of the Thessalonian's inclusion in God's kingdom. While such hostility is unfortunate and unpleasant, it ought not be unexpected, as Paul had written in his First Letter, "You know quite well that we were destined for them" (3:3). Martin Luther said that wherever the true gospel is preached and practiced the cross will not be absent.

If any believer or group of believers holds on to Christ and his Word, we should expect the same kind of treatment. Jesus declared to his disciples, “No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (John 15:20). For these reasons Paul includes in the section appropriate words of thanks and boasting for what God had worked in and among the Thessalonians. He was thankful that they were serving as an example to all the churches of living out their faith and boasted how they willingly endured their sufferings. Such sufferings can in truth give us joy as we too strive to follow our Savior, increasing in faith and love, because they are a sign that we are being true to him and being made more and more like Christ, our perfect head.

*Prayer: O Lord God, we give you thanks for spreading your gospel around the globe and thereby filling the hearts and lives of your faithful people with your holy love. As your Spirit empowers us to suffer for you, we especially remember today our brothers and sisters in faith the world over who endure much more overt, painful, and deadly persecution than we ourselves. We rejoice in their bold witness and ask you to protect and comfort and finally save them and us all. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.*