

May God Establish Your Hearts

1 Thessalonians 3: 1-13

**First Presbyterian Church
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Gerrit Scott Dawson**

We are reading what may well be the oldest writing in the New Testament. Paul's letter to the Thessalonian Christians is the first of his writings that we know about. Written around AD 50, just a decade and a half after Jesus' resurrection, Thessalonians probably precedes any of the gospels in their present form. So we have a window into the early church. We get a glimpse of the earliest belief in Jesus and the difficulties the new followers of a new faith faced. Turns out they are not very different than what we face today. Let's lift out three distinctives in our passage today.

1) Falling Back. Paul had only a short time in Thessalonica before persecution drove him out of town. He wanted to stay longer. He wanted to teach these new Christians the essentials of the faith. Paul wanted to model life in Christ for them. But he was forced to go before his work was done. So he worried about the Thessalonians. Did the gospel really take with them? Would they stick with the gospel? Especially when they got criticized, ridiculed and socially ostracized for adopting this strange, crazy new faith?

In a parable about a farmer sowing seed, Jesus taught how there are different kinds of soil into which the seed can fall. He spoke of the rocky soil where seed grew up quickly into a lovely plant. But because of the rocks, there was no depth of soil, and so when the sun got hot as summer moved on, the plants withered. These, Jesus said, were those who received the gospel joyfully, but actually have no root in themselves. When persecution or difficulty occurs on account of Christ, these folks wither in the heat.

That was Paul's concern. Had a real root of faith really been sunk down into the souls of the Thessalonian Christians so they could take the heat? Or would it be easier just to fall back into the old ways? Paul knew they would be tempted. Think how it might have played out in a Thessalonian home. "Look, son, everyone goes through phases when they are young. You try on different ways of thinking and acting. But when you grow up, you realize you have to make a living in this town. You have to get along with people. You can't be part of a Jesus cult and get anywhere in the world. Why don't you just come back to the temple of Isis this weekend and let me introduce you to some people?"

Or, “Look, friend, I know you got enamored with this “god” Paul was talking about. Jesus looked like a way to make you feel better about life. But you’re embarrassing your husband. You’ll drive a wedge between the two of you. You’ll alienate him from the kids. And people don’t want to invite you over anymore. You’re losing your friends. Why don’t you just come back to synagogue this Saturday? I’ll make dinner for the old crowd and you can all get along again.”

We know about this. You get convicted. You get excited. You feel the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ and you want to live differently. But everything in your old life pulls you back. No one you know really wants you to take Jesus so seriously. Just stay like the rest of us. Find your solace with us at the club or on the course. Take a trip. Go to a game. Do some charity work if you have to, but just keep it normal, OK?

Social pressure can make us fall back. But even more subtle and more dangerous is the very inertia of life. We just get carried along by all there is to do. A great river of requirements is swooshing us along. Every now and then our heads break the surface. We look around and think, “I want to go a different way. I want to live more significantly for Christ.” But then the waters of our activities slosh over us and carry us along and months pass and nothing changes.

One of the most reliable sources of spiritual nourishment for me has been the writing of Pope Benedict. Time and again, he puts his finger right on our contemporary struggles. He writes:

The things of God do not impose themselves on us directly. And so the great majority of us tend to postpone them. First we do what seems urgent here and now. In the list of priorities God is often more or less at the end. We can always deal with that later, we tend to think. [But] the gospels tell us: God is the highest priority. If anything in our life deserves haste without delay, then, it is God’s work alone...God is by far the most important thing in our lives...we should learn not to be crushed by all the pressing matters in our daily lives. We must cultivate the inner freedom to put other tasks in second place—however important they may be—so as to make our way towards God, to allow Him into our lives and into our time. Time given to God and, in his name, to our neighbor, is never lost. It is the time when we are most truly alive.¹

Paul rejoiced when he found that the Thessalonians had not fallen back into the old life. “For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord.” Social pressure, the inertia of daily life and even outright persecution had not turned them back. The Thessalonians were rooted in Christ and so they grew.

2) Devotion to Jesus as to God. In his joy, Paul’s writing turns to a prayer. We will see this all through Paul’s writing. He often teaches the most when he simply writes down what he is praying. Paul’s prayer begins:

Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase...

It would be very easy to miss why this sentence is so important. It sounds so normal to our ears. But notice what Paul is doing here. He starts praying that God would do something: “May our God and Father...” Then he adds in Jesus as an equal with God. His prayer assumes that Jesus will act with God the Father, in concert, as one. “May our God and Father and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you.” The Jews had been hated and persecuted for centuries because they refused to acknowledge any other God than the LORD I Am, the God of Israel. Paul had been a Pharisee, the kind of Jew who dedicated his life to purity of worshipping the one and only God. Now here was Paul praying to Jesus, the rabbi from Nazareth. He called this Jesus “Lord,” a title strictly reserved by Jews for the one true God. This Jesus who had sweated among us, bled among us, died and rose among us as a man, Paul prays to as Lord alongside God the Father.

The devotion to Jesus as God come among us as a man did not develop gradually over the centuries. It exploded on the scene. It has been part of our worship from the earliest days. Every other month, there will be some new television special or book or article that talks about the big bad Church making humble Jesus into a deity so they could control people. That’s simply bad history and bad scholarship. Don’t be fooled. Christians from the beginning have been devoted to Jesus as on par with God the Father.

And here’s the even more amazing thing about Paul’s prayer. He prays it as if it were no new thing. As if it were simply understood. May God the Father and the Lord Jesus. He gives no explanation like I’m giving. He assumes the Thessalonians consider this normal.

If I say to one of my children, “Email me later when you know your plans,” no one thinks that’s a big deal. There’s nothing astounding in that sentence. It’s normal. Nine year olds to ninety year olds in America know about emailing. We all have computers and most of us have phones by which we can send electronic messages. Twenty years ago, emailing was novel, only a few were doing it, and you had to explain what you meant by it. But by 15 years ago, almost everyone knew what you meant. Now it’s a routine part of life. Email needs no explanation. It’s normal.

When Paul prays to God the Father and Jesus the Lord without explanation, it means that this way of thinking was normal among Christians. It was already established. A revolution in thinking about God was already underway. The one true God has his very life in relationship. He is Father and Son. Later in the letter, Paul would bring in the Holy Spirit as also being God. Yes, we had to get all the theology worked out over the centuries, but the real revolution, that the one God is in three persons, took place right from the start. Jesus is Lord because he is God come to us in flesh and blood. Because God is Trinity, we can know that God is love and that he has opened his life of love to us. All in a little prayer phrase!

3) Love Leads to Holiness. Let’s follow the rest of Paul’s prayer. “May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all...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.” Paul prays that love would increase for each other so that holiness could increase before God. Love leads to holiness. Loving each other increases our connection to God.

I’m not usually very fond of the word holiness. It sounds like not doing the things I want to do. And doing all the things I don’t want to do. So I can be pious and annoying in front of other people. But that doesn’t seem to be what this is about at all. The focus is on abounding in love. Somehow, this leads to appearing before God without being ashamed. Paul’s goal is that they stand before the all-seeing, secret-revealing, truth-telling presence of God and rejoice. They will not be worried because their overflowing lives of love will have prepared them for God’s presence. If God is a communion of love and desires to be in a communion of love with us and one another, then this actually makes a lot of sense. Abounding in love makes us like our God who is love.

Last Monday, I attended the meeting of our Board of Deacons. Two of our deacons gave devotions. They moved me. Sharon Dixon gave a tribute to

her mother, in her mid-nineties and still passionate about living. Sharon spoke of how her mother now loves to speak to people she encounters in waiting rooms or stores. She notices that a lot of people in doctor's offices are not as joyful as she is. So she asks how they're doing. She listens and commiserates. Then she loves to quote to them Psalm 118, "This is the day that the LORD has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it." Whether the day is easy or hard, pleasant or challenging, it is a day of life granted by God. It is the day God has sent us. He is with us and will not leave us. Whatever the day, we will receive it and even more, rejoice and be glad in it. Every hour is a precious gift and we can live in joy if we live giving thanks.

Then Deacon Joe Willis gave his reflections. He remembered the challenge I gave at the start of the Thessalonian series to lift up people in thanksgiving for five minutes a day. As he practiced not just asking for things for people, but giving thanks for people before God, a key turned in his mind. Joe spoke of how he has for some time been contemplating the love between the Father and the Son. He has been pondering Romans 8 where we read that the Spirit of God in our hearts cries out "Abba" to God our Father. Joe said he prayed that he could know more of the eternal intimacy between the Father and the Son. He wanted to know and then participate in the God who is love.

While he was giving thanks to God for people, he felt like the Spirit gave him an insight into his quest to know Christ more. He says it seemed that the Spirit told him, "If you want to know me, love my people. If you want to experience the intimacy of my being, pray and rejoice in these people I have given you. Love them and serve them and then you will know me." So, Joe said, "I realized that my personal spiritual growth is inseparable from my life amidst the rest of you. God will not be known apart from the community of his people."

That's the wonder of Christian faith. It's not just an interior spiritual practice. It's not being holy in a way that isolates us. It's about increasing in abounding love for others as the very path God has given us to know him more intimately. In our passage this morning, Paul links faith and love. We stand firm in trusting Jesus as our Lord and Savior. We press forward in loving his people and the world. Faith and love work like the pedals on a bicycle, propelling us forward so that we await the return of Christ with joy, not fear. For we are becoming more and more attuned to the God who himself is love as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

All spirituality is inseparable from life in community. All community is local. It's about the local body of Christ in every place that connects us to the universal communion of the saints. For this season of life, God has called us to each other in this body of believers on North Blvd. It's no accident that the word God chose to be used for his people is church. For church comes from a Greek word that means "assembly." The gathering together face to face of a people bonded to each other in Christ. That's why I love these single services, when our four worshipping congregations join as one. We alternate the accent of the language of worship we speak. For we know that it is important that we can all speak each other's language even if we prefer normally our own. For our voices tune as one when we praise our God and Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. May he indeed make us increase and abound in love that we all may not fall back but appear blameless before him in holiness at the coming of Lord Jesus Christ.

ⁱ Pope Benedict XVI, *The Faith* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor), 2013, p. 58.