May you be filled with the true and living love of God

Well, the time is fast approaching for my surgery. This is my last sermon for a while. This Sunday (yes, Sunday!) I will miss church because I have to go to have a Covid test. My surgery is scheduled for Wednesday the 16th. After that, the doctor wants me doing nothing for at least a month. If everything goes well, I’m hoping to be back to church January 17th.

In the meantime, Brock VanMeter and Will Harvey will be filling in for me giving the message. Joe Kesner will be taking care of the worship service, and Scott Wahlberg will be taking care of Adult Sunday School. I’m not planning on there being any Wednesday evening Bible study while I’m off, however, if someone would like to attend Bible study, talk to Scott and he will be willing to have it.

I want to thank these folks ahead of time; for their service to the Lord and for making my life easier. I also want to thank each and every one of you for your prayers. Please continue to pray for the church as it is pleasing to God when we pray for the body of Christ.

In Christ’s love

John

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1 Thessalonians 2:17 – 3:13 (2)

Last week, we looked over some of these passages and then considered apostasy more in depth. Paul was afraid that the Thessalonians may have turned away from their faith in Jesus Christ as a result of the suffering that they were enduring. The Bible warns us of apostasy many times and we need to take the warning seriously. It is good for us to occasionally check our lives to make sure we are bearing fruit that is pleasing to God, and holding fast to our belief that Jesus is the only way to the Father while putting all our trust in Him.

Paul is having to deal with a problem that he knows is taking place in the church in Thessalonica: There are people who are making the accusation that Paul was only in this for his own gain and that when the going got hard, he left town. Paul makes an impassioned and strong defense for himself. As we have discussed earlier, he is able to point to his own behavior while he was with them. He had truly gained no material good from them the entire time he was with them. He worked to earn his own money and paid his own bills. The evidence that he was not in this for gain was strong.

Our lesson from this is to watch our own behavior. No matter where we are or what we are doing. If we talk Christian talk and don’t act like Christians, we won’t be able to gain a hearing for the Gospel. Others won’t believe us, and rightly so. We can’t fake our Christian behavior; eventually our real heart will come through and what we say will no longer make any difference. Let the Holy Spirit work in your lives. We need to cooperate with Him and try to live holy lives, but ultimately it is Him who will change our hearts. Because we are fallible human-beings, we will mess up. When this happens, be willing to try to right whatever wrong was done. This will go a long way in helping others to see what the Christian life is about.

In everything that was going on with Paul, he knew who he was dealing with. He was dealing with satan. Satan was keeping him from visiting the Thessalonian church, and satan was also attacking the church itself. This will always happen when advancement is made for the kingdom of heaven.

It seems like we are always surprised when things go wrong in our Christian ministry. We need to get past this. Expect that there will be problems any time we work for Christ. Simply the act of becoming a Christian makes us a target for evil. Jesus warned that we would face tribulation. Time and again in Paul’s letters, we see that he warned the churches that persecution would come. Knowing this is part of counting the cost of being a disciple of Christ.

The church in Thessalonica was certainly under attack from forces outside the church. The government and others in society made life difficult for them. But there were also those voices Paul had to defend himself against; the voices that spread the seeds of doubt about Paul and the Gospel. This is one of the primary weapons of satan; spreading doubt.

Think back to Genesis 3; satan sowed doubt in the mind of Eve. Just the way he phrased his first question: “*Indeed, has God said, ‘You shall not eat from any tree of the garden’?*”, would have caused Eve to wonder about the command. This was followed up with an outright lie. “*You surely will not die*!” Causing doubt and using lies is a primary tactic of satan; and he was using this against the Thessalonian church. He will use it against us too.

Satan tried to sow the seeds of doubt against Paul’s intentions with the Thessalonians. But they didn’t fall for it; they still thought kindly of Paul and longed to see him also. We must be so careful of this attack. It is so easy to start doubting someone we trust with no good reason. Perhaps we hear something bad about them. (Gossip) If it doesn’t fit their known character, don’t let that seed sprout; take hold of it and pull it out before it grows. These kinds of things can ruin a church.

Paul let the church know that he had made plans to come see them, but satan had hindered him. Satan didn’t want Paul there encouraging and teaching the Christians. In the book of Acts, we read that Paul was stopped from traveling to some of the parts of Asia by the Holy Spirit. He had the discernment to know the difference.

We also need this kind of discernment: If we are doing something we believe is for God’s kingdom and we have trouble, how do we know if God is stopping us or if satan is trying to stop us? First, of course, is prayer. Proverbs 16:3, *Commit your works to the Lord, And your plans will be established*. Next would be to make sure that the project is Biblical. The Bible is always our standard for determining what is pleasing to God. Finally, I have a rule of thumb for telling the difference: God closes doors, satan sets up stumbling blocks.

If you begin a ministry project and it comes up against an impassable problem, stop beating on the door and look around; God will open another door for you. If the going is difficult and problems need to be solved along the way, these are stumbling blocks, keep going.

I think it may help us to deal with these trials if we understand that our battles in the physical world are just a small part of something greater in the spiritual world. There is a tremendous conflict between good and evil, between God’s forces and satan’s. An example is in Daniel 10. Daniel had been praying for many days when an angel appeared to him. The angel explained that he had been sent to Daniel when he first started praying, and in verse 13 tells him: *But the prince of the kingdom of Persia was standing in my way for twenty-one days; then behold, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I had been left there with the kings of Persia*.

The princes and kings the angel was talking about were not earthly rulers but spiritual powers and principalities. Even a powerful angel sent by God was hindered by one of satan’s demons. When we persevere in ministry for God, we are part of this great cosmic battle. Why does God allow this? We certainly don’t know all of God’s plan here, but we do know this. When we, as human-beings, persevere against the impossible odds of satan, God is glorified. This makes everything worthwhile.

Back in Paul’s letter in verses 19 and 20 we read, “*For who is our hope, or joy or crown of exultation, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? Or is it not indeed you? For you are our glory and joy*.” What Paul writes here is very interesting and we need to take it in context with the rest of Paul’s writings and in the whole Bible. There is no question that the Thessalonian church brings him much joy here on earth. His life is intimately bound up with theirs. The fact that these beloved people will spend eternity with Christ gives Paul great reason to celebrate.

But let’s also consider something Paul wrote to the Galatians, this is chapter 6 verse 14: *But far be it from me to boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*” Truly our only glory comes through the work of Jesus on the cross. By His work, when we believe on Him, He will graciously share His glory with us once we leave this earth. This is the only glory we ought to seek for ourselves; otherwise, we seek glory for Christ.

Another thing to keep in mind is the two great commandments that Jesus identified for us: Love God and love your neighbor. Putting these things together, I think we get the idea of what Paul is saying. Paul, and we ourselves, work to bring glory to Christ. It is Jesus’ work and sacrifice that enables salvation. All the glory should be His. Because we love others, we want to see them come to Christ. Because we love God, it brings us joy to see Him glorified and to see His kingdom increase.

I’m sure we have all done something for someone else, and felt great satisfaction in their happiness. Perhaps we have played a part in someone we care about achieving success, and we are content with their success even though we receive nothing ourselves. That is how the Christian is with Jesus. If we can be a part of His kingdom increasing, which brings Him glory, our joy will be in seeing His glory and increase.

Paul writes about how much he prayed regarding the Thessalonian church. He prayed that their faith would stay strong in the face of suffering. He prayed that he would be able to visit them and minister to them. When Timothy returned with news that the church was still strong and that they still hoped to see Paul, he offered up much thanksgiving.

Thinking of his prayers and overjoyed with the news he received about the church, Paul breaks into prayer for them here in his letter. We can learn a lot about prayer and how to pray by reading the prayers that Paul records.

In verse 11 he says, “*Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you*”. The first thing to notice is the combining of God the Father and Jesus. Here again we have the evidence that although they are separate persons, the Father and Jesus are one. This is one of those things about God that we can’t quite comprehend: how one Being can have three distinct persons. But the Bible is clear that there is only one God, and that He exists as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is just one more demonstration that God is far above us and that we are simply His creation. So, we Christians happily proclaim this truth in faith.

Another thing we see is that Paul is willing to ask for something just because he desires it. True, he wants to do more work with the Thessalonians, but we can see that he just really wants to be with them and enjoy their fellowship. From this we know that it is not wrong to ask God for things we desire. God has no problem with us bringing before Him in prayer our wants along with our needs.

What comes with this is that we must be willing to accept His answer. Paul once prayed several times to be delivered from the messenger from satan that buffeted him. After the third time he asked, God told him “no”. If we ask for something and God tells us “no”, it is time to stop asking and thank God for the “no”. If we aren’t told “no”, it is okay to keep asking until our request is granted. Paul got to go back to Thessalonica, but it wasn’t for five years. We must be content with God’s timing; they may seem like delays to us, but God is never late.

In verse 12 his prayer continues with “*and may the Lord cause you to increase and overflow in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you*”. Wow, as Christians, the love we have for others should never stagnate, it should grow stronger. Here, in this body of Christ, we ought to daily grow in love for all those who are here with us in this worship service. Our love and concern for the worldwide body of Christ must also grow. Perhaps even more astounding, our love needs to grow for the unbelieving world; all those who have not chosen Jesus as their Saviour.

It ought to help us love the non-believing people when we consider their eternal fate. Our hearts need to ache for the slaves of satan; those whose lives are directed by demonic influence and carnal nature. The time will come for us when misery will be over and done with; for them it will only get worse.

This kind of love is beyond us to achieve on our own. We must have the Holy Spirit active in our lives for this love to grow. We have our part: Remember that Christian love is a decision not a feeling; we must be careful not to quench the Holy Spirit; love becomes a bigger part of us as we read and study the powerful and living words of Scripture, immersing ourselves in them; and being willing to intercede for others in prayer. In doing these things, the Holy Spirit will produce the fruit of love in our lives.

Lastly, Paul prays “*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*”. Again, we see that wondrous combining of the Father and Jesus into one true God.

But this part of the prayer brings to mind the need for our personal holiness. It brings us face to face with the question, “What is Jesus going to find me doing when He comes back?” At the moment of Christ’s return, do you want to be found standing there in sin? Or would you rather be found living your life busy with the Father’s work? How embarrassing it would be to be in the midst of something stupid when the trumpet sounds and Jesus appears in glory followed by a vast army of the departed saints and all His angels. All the more reason to be devoted to a holy life.

Christian, God-like, sacrificial love is so important for the disciples of Jesus Christ. Love for God and love for man. This kind of love, like what we see in Paul, is not one of the options we can choose from; it is the command of Christ. Along with this command He gives us help to achieve it. Jesus told us He would never leave us or forsake us. We have received the Holy Spirit as a constant help and guide. If we have not love, all we do for the kingdom is worthless. Choose to love, work toward it, and you will receive the all-powerful help of God.

Prayer

Merciful Father, thank You that You understand our weakness and frailty. You would be just and right to crush us in our sinfulness and rebellion. But You are longsuffering and willing to withhold deserved wrath to give us time to turn to Your Son Jesus for salvation.

You tell us to love others and sometimes that is hard. It is even difficult with fellow believers at times. Remind us, Lord, that You love that fellow believer as much as You love us. It is difficult to love the worldly; they oppose us and revile our attempts to show the way of salvation. Remind us, Lord, that You died for us while we were still Your enemies.

Precious Jesus, we look forward to Your glorious return, when Your kingdom is established here on earth. We pray for Your kingdom to come. We await Your sudden appearance with the vast host of heaven; what a day that will be! Until then, keep us working and growing, producing the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Lord Jesus, we pray these things in Your name

Amen