

Prayer for People

1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

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As we continue the series on the **Priorities in Prayer**, we will be turning our attention this evening to Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. Specifically tonight, we will be looking at our priorities in praying for people. The occasion for this letter is toward the end of Paul's second missionary journey during an 18 month stay in Corinth. According to Acts, Paul's journey has taken him from Thessalonica to Corinth with stops in Berea and Athens. Sometime during his stay in Corinth Paul sends Timothy to Thessalonica to see how the church is doing there. Upon Timothy's return, Paul writes the first of two letters to encourage the church in Thessalonica.



In this first letter to the church, Paul writes to encourage these new believers. He reminds them of what Christ has done in their midst, he instructs them to walk in righteousness, and clarifies some confusion around the day of Christ's return. But amid these instructions we continually see Paul's deep love for the people there and his deep concern for the work of ministry that had begun to grow. Our passage this evening flows out of a short section of this letter where Paul responds to the report he received from Timothy. Here the love, concern, and care of an Elder is expressed and we get a glimpse into how he prayed for them. In doing so, it also provides a pattern for us as we pray for people.

As I studied this passage I couldn't help thinking of how Paul's departure has the similar feel as the recent departures of two dear Elders, Chad and Devon. In God's sovereign plan, they have moved on to other churches after lengthy and fruitful ministries here at the Chapel. For those of you who know them well, you understand that though they have left us, they have not really left us. They carry a love for the Chapel ministry and its people in their hearts. This is evident in their e-mails, text messages, phone calls, and consistent prayers that convey the affection they still have for both the people and ministry of the Chapel. On several occasions they have sent the Elders e-mails or texts letting us know they are praying for us and for you. And I suspect that they have and continue to do the same for many of you.

Just like Paul and the Thessalonians, there is a shared spiritual connection with Devon and Chad that transcends physical distance and connects our hearts and lives. Today, we connect through a variety of electronic methods. We can easily pick up our phones and in seconds be connected on a call. Can you imagine what Paul could have done if he would have had Facebook and Twitter? But seriously, back in the days of the early church Paul had to rely on letters delivered by personal messengers. The advantage of this type of communication is that both the message and the messenger were able to convey the care and affection Paul had for the Thessalonians.

As we look at our text this evening, I remind you that while this is Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, it is no less God's word to us. Every paragraph and every thought inspired and intended to help us to know God and His ways. Timothy Keller, in his book on prayer, suggest that just as a child learns to communicate by listening and learning from its parents, so believers learn to communicate to God by listening to the words and examples our Father has given us in His word.

That is why this series is so important. It's not just a bunch of sermons on prayer. Each message is intended to help you listen to how the Father is teaching us to communicate to Him in prayer. Each message is helping you hear what and how to pray. Each message is equipping you to pray in a variety of circumstances. Just as the way each of us communicates reflects the words and patterns of our earthly parents, my hope is that God uses this message and this series, to shape our communication to reflect the words and patterns of our heavenly Father.

[opening prayer]

Before we read our passage, I'd like to cover the background and give some context. In the verses just before our text, Paul conveys that he could not bear the burden of concern for the Thessalonians any longer. So he sends Timothy to encourage them and bring back a report. Paul's concerns were two-fold. First, he was concerned that the church had heard of Paul's afflictions for the sake of the gospel and were troubled by the news. Timothy was to go to Thessalonica and remind them that Paul was called to suffer for the sake of the Gospel just as he had told them. They need not be troubled. Also, Paul was concerned with how the church there was progressing. He had been forced out of the city unexpectedly when they left Thessalonica and Paul could not wait any longer to hear news of how they were doing.

With that in mind, please turn to 1 Thessalonians 3 and follow along as we start at verse 6. 1 Corinthians Chapter 3, verses 6 through 13. This is God's word to us this evening.

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— for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith? Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, 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 coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Praying for People

- The Report (v. 6-7)
 - Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news
- The Response (v. 8-10)
 - For all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, as we pray most earnestly night and day
- The Request (v. 11-13)
 - May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all

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Let's begin by looking at the opening of our passage. How does Paul begin? First, we see that the occasion for the prayer is Timothy's return and his report. He has communicated Paul's message, spent some time with them finding out how they are doing, and made his way back to Paul. Second, we see that the report is one of good news. Paul has learned that the church is doing well in both faith and love. And just as Paul has longed to see them again, they have longed for him to return so they could see him. The effect of Timothy's visit filled their hearts full of love and kindness for each other. The fullness of their spiritual connection had been rekindled and brought warmth and comfort to each other.

There is a tenderness here that reflects the love that brothers and sisters in Christ share for one another. In fact, we know from John 13 and First John 4 that Christians are to be known by the love we have for one another. It is to be a defining characteristic of our community and life together. And while distance does not diminish the bonds we share in Christ, there is always a longing to be reunited with those who have left our presence. Perhaps this is a reflection in part, of the spiritual longing and hope we have to one day be reunited in the glorious presence of our Lord and King. Until that day we long for, we will patiently wait like Paul until we can see our brothers and sisters again. If not in this life, then most certainly in heaven above.

Timothy's report also has another important effect. Look at verse 7 again. Paul writes, "*for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith.*" The report of their steadfast faith is a great comfort to Paul even, or should I say especially, in the midst of trials and affliction. Have you ever thought that your steady and faithful way of living for Christ could be an encouragement and comfort to those who are walking through difficulty and suffering? Have you ever prayed that those who are living with afflictions would be comforted by the faith of others? Do you get a sense of the mutual encouragement within the body that is going on here? You see the connection we have with one another causes us to

be encouraged by the faith of others in the midst of distress; while at the same time, it returns comfort to those who see the evidence of that faith. The evidence of the power of the good news of the Gospel is seen with greater clarity when the spotlight of suffering and affliction reveal the good news of faithful lives.

In verses 8 through 10 we move from the occasion of the prayer to the joyful result. Paul continues by conveying their response to Timothy's report. Look at verse 8. See how Paul starts out by saying, "*for now we live*" after hearing the report that the church is standing steadfast in the Lord. The sense here is that Paul is thrilled to hear this news. His spirit is flying with a fullness of joy to know they are walking with the Lord. I am reminded here, of John's third letter where he writes, "*I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.*" This is the sense of Paul's love and care for God's people. His natural response to the report is great joy.

One of my favorite movies is "Princess Bride". There is an important and emotional scene in the movie when Buttercup discovers that the Dread Pirate Roberts is actually her true love Westley; and at which point they both fall down a long and steep embankment. After several severe tumbles and falls that should have broken nearly every bone in their bodies, they land in a heap at the bottom. Westley says to Buttercup, "Can you move at all?" To which Buttercup joyfully replies, "Move? You're alive. If you want I can fly." You see, there is something about genuine joy and love that carries us above and through severe affliction. It is the kind of love that captures our attention even in the midst of suffering. The darkness of Paul's distress and affliction is erased by the brightness of great joy found in the good news of the church walking faithfully in Christ.

Genuine faith stands the test of time and suffering. And genuine faith moves us to genuine thanksgiving. We must note here that while undoubtedly that joy was shared by all those with him, in verse 9 Paul takes his joy vertical. Let's read verse 9 again. "*For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God.*" In essence what Paul is saying here is this. The Thessalonians had given him so much to be thankful for that he could not help expressing his great joy over them to the Father. I wonder how often we are more prone to complain and grumble about our brothers and sisters rather than bow before the Lord with genuine joy over their faith and perseverance through the difficulties of life. May God grant us hearts that default to thanksgiving and praise for the faithful lives of others in our hearts and in our prayers.

We also note in Paul's response that there is an earnestness of his prayer for people. The Greek word for "earnestness" in verse 10 convey a strong and emotional sense of care and concern. It was the kind of praying for people that cannot be stopped. In fact, we read that night and day they prayed for the Thessalonians. There is a pattern of persistence we are to see in Paul's prayers for people. He keeps on praying. In other words, he never stops praying for them. Not in the sense that Paul is praying every minute of every day. But in the sense that Paul continually thinks of them and prays for them both day and night.

In contrast, I think of the weakness of my own prayer life. Sure, I make times to pray for others and I pray hard in moments of crisis. But I need to be more committed to a more frequent and

persistent praying for people. And to pray as often for God to meet spiritual needs as I do for God to meet the simple demands of this life.

Notice the pattern of Paul's prayer here. His praise is followed by petition; his rejoicing is followed by request. And so before God he also expresses his desire to see the Thessalonians' faith to be made complete. Paul's heart for the church here is that as much as he longs to see them, he asks God to supply them all they need to walk in maturity and faith. May God take our prayers of thanksgiving for His people and turn them into prayers for spiritual growth and maturity for the sake and glory of His name. And may the heart of our prayers for people be about their spiritual condition. Like Paul, let us ask that God supply others what is needed for them to walk in maturity of faith.

Paul concludes this part of his letter in verses 11 to 13 by making a final declarative request for the church. It seems as if Paul is expanding on the nature of his prayer in the later part of verse 10. Paul puts in writing a closing benediction as a fervent pronouncement out of his previous prayer. Verse 11 repeats his desire to see them again for the third time in these verses. Verse 12 repeats the request for spiritual growth specifically focusing on the area of love for one another. And verse 13 provides the reason for the first two declarations, which is that they be established in righteousness before the Lord. The ultimate aim of Paul's prayer for the church is that their hearts, minds, and actions be found blameless before the Lord.

Let's look at verses 11 to 13 and I want you to notice the word "may" at the beginning of each verse. First, we have "May our God and Lord Jesus" at the beginning of 11. Then we have "may the Lord" at the start of 12. And finally, we have "that he may", referring again to the Lord at the beginning of verse 13. The importance of this repetition is that Paul is acknowledging his dependence upon God. Paul reminds us that our prayers for people are completely dependent upon God. We must give up any illusion that we can bring about the work of God in the hearts of people on our own.

In verse 11, Paul declares that both God and the Lord Jesus would direct his paths back to the Thessalonians. Paul's desire being expressed is that God would smooth out the path or clear the way for his return. Paul does not tell us what the obstacles were or how they should be resolved. He simply places his trust in God to bring him back to the church again so that he may continue the work of love and instruction in their presence.

I was particularly challenged by Paul's prayer to physically be with the Thessalonians in this way. Is it possible, that in our prayers we often pray that God would answer the request without a thought to our own involvement? Do we pray for comfort, encouragement, and material needs but expect God to use other means by which He provides an answer? Should we pray like Paul, that God would clear the way so that we might be the hands and feet of Christ to meet the spiritual needs of others? Let us be like Paul, with a heartfelt longing to be with others and not just pray for people from a distance and forget to be engaged in a personal way.

Similarly in verse 12, Paul declares that the Lord would make them increase in their love for others. Notice how Paul connects their love with the measures of both increasing and abounding. Paul's hope and prayer is that their love for others would grow and grow to a point where it

overflowed from every facet of their lives. The sense of the declaration here is that the love they have for others would be a reflection of the deep love he has for them.

Notice also the scope of their love for others. He says that their love should increase and abound for one another and for all. Paul is specific in his desire here. They are to have a love for their brothers and sisters in Christ. But Paul does not stop there. He says that their love should extend beyond the church to include all. All is a pretty inclusive word. I believe that what Paul means here, is that we are to have a love that includes those who are lost and perishing. This would seem to include even those who are our enemies or persecute us. And it certainly would include those who look different or are not like us.

Paul gives us an example of prayer of people that asks God to make their love for others grow. That they would reflect the love of Christ in the body. Our prayers for people in conflicts and tension should be aimed at peace and unity. Our prayers for people who are growing in faith should be a deeper and deeper love for Christ and care for others. As we pray for people in suffering and difficulty, let us not only ask God for strength and hope to endure, but also for God to shine His glory through them as a light to those who are without hope. And our prayers for people should always reflect a love for the lost and requests that long for their salvation.

Finally, in verse 13 Paul gives us the “so what” of his request to be with them and for their love to grow. Why does Paul ask these two things of the Lord? We see by the words “so that” the Paul is providing the basis for his request. It is *so that* the Lord would establish or strengthen them in their hearts to walk in righteousness before God. Paul’s hope is for the Thessalonians to look past their troubles and suffering and to walk faithfully as a holy people, ready for the coming of the Lord. No matter how hard life is or how difficult the time, our ultimate hope is the day of Christ’s coming when the distresses and suffering of this life will be no more.

What a tremendous challenge we have here in prayers for people. So often our prayers stop short of the “so what” that Paul has shown us here. As we pray for physical strength, let us pray for spiritual strength. As we pray for comfort, let us pray for faithfulness. As we pray for healing, let us pray for righteousness. And as we pray for good results, let us pray for godly results. May our prayers reflect a strength of faith that hopes and believes that God can do far more than is evident in this world. Let our prayers reflect a strength of faith in the power of the Gospel to change hearts that turns other toward holiness and a hope for Christ’s return.



As we close tonight, I'd like us to consider what it must have been like for the Thessalonians to hear this part of the letter; to listen to how Paul was praying for them. Can you remember a time when someone told you they were praying for you? Or a time when someone shared how they had prayed for you at a particular moment in the past? Recently, Devon has sent a few e-mails to all of the Elders on the day we have our meeting to let us know he is praying for us. Several of us have had similar emails from Chad letting us know he is praying for us in the middle of a difficult situation. For me, those have been moments of intense encouragement and I am so thankful for the evidences of prayer that come not only from absent friends, but from our flocks and friends here at the Chapel.

As I prepared for this passage, I was struck by the connection between love and our prayers for people. Paul's heartfelt prayer flows out of a love for Christ and the church. It is this great love for people that drives him to pray often. And it is his great love for Christ that drives him to pray for their spiritual growth and maturity. If we desire to be more faithful and fervent in our prayers, then we must first be more faithful and fervent in our love for others. I have heard it said, that if you want to see what a person loves you simply need to look at who and what they spend their money on and who and what they pray for. So let me ask you tonight, what does your prayer life look like?

When I looked closely at Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians, I saw the reflection of the Gospel. I believe that there also should be a connection between the Gospel and our prayers for people. I saw a heart full of Christ-like love for others and a deep concern for their spiritual condition. I saw a passion for holiness and maturity caused by the transforming power of the cross. I saw a desire for the hearts and faith of others to be strong and steadfast in Christ. Do our own prayers reflect the Gospel? Do we pray in this way for people? Is it possible that too often we pray for what is easy and simple at the surface, rather than work hard in our prayers to ask God for

underlying spiritual needs? Those kinds of prayers take time. We must think and consider the person and situation in order to pray well. We must pour our hearts and minds into requests that are formed for the spiritual good of others and the glory of God.

If we truly love the Gospel it will fuel our love for others. And it a gospel-kind of love that will drive us to pray for people. In light of our own hearts it is important for us to examine how we see others. Do we, like Paul, see them through the Gospel? Paul saw the Thessalonians as a joy and blessing. The news of their faithfulness in the midst of difficulty caused him to respond with rejoicing. But if we see people and their imperfections as irritations or inconveniences, we are going to have trouble praying for them. When you work in ministry and people are a challenge, do not complain. Instead, love them and pray for them. When you interact with those who are lost and without Christ, do not avoid them. Instead, love them and pray for them. And if you find it hard to love them, pray that God would help you to love them. And maybe you will find that in praying for others, you will also grow in your love for them.

A final reflection on this passage is that there is also a connection between faith and our prayers for people. First, there is a sense of having faith in God when we pray. We pray calling upon his greatness and might to do all that we ask and more. We ask God for what we cannot do ourselves; fully acknowledging our dependence upon Him. We pray believing that God hears us through the Spirit who indwells us, through the Son who has opened the throne room to us, and to the Father who is sovereign over all.

But there is another level of faith active when we pray for people. There is a sense that we pray in faith, entrusting those we love to God's sovereign will and plan. We pray in a way that rests in God's perfect care over those we pray for. This is evident in Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians. He longs to be with them, but ultimately he is entrusting them to the Lord. While we are to express our hearts longings and desires to God, we must ultimately ask that God's will be done regardless of what we may think best. This looks like our prayers for the Merck's when we send them into a difficult and dangerous area. This looks like prayers for those who face life-threatening illnesses. This looks like prayers for dear loved ones who are lost. We ask and pray for people in a way that trusts in God's abiding care and ability to glorify His name in their lives.

I understand that this passage sets a difficult standard for our prayer lives. My hope is to encourage you to this kind of prayer. It may be challenging, but don't give up in working toward this kind of prayer. God has given us these prayers in scripture not just to teach us how to pray, but how to pray more like our Heavenly Father.

As we come to a close, here are some practical ideas to help you grow in this area. First, take more time to pray. Give yourself time to think. God is okay with silent pauses where you take time to think and consider how to pray. Second, write out a prayer or two before you pray. Writing the prayer out will force you to consider how you pray and what you pray for. Lastly, keep reading through the passages that have been selected for this series. These are examples of biblical prayers meant to help you in your own prayers. In them you will hear the voice of our Lord and your prayers will reflect the words and spirit of your Father.

[closing prayer]

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