

January 19, 2020

“A Passion for Prayer”
1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

FCF: Our struggle to love

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Jesus calls us to pray with others in mind.
(magnet) We need to learn from the models He gives.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Our world has some odd ideas about love. Go online and do a search on “love means” and you get some interesting results. “Love means taking a chance” - great for next time you’re in Vegas. “Love means never having to say you’re sorry” - famous and lame advice from *Love Story*. “Love means having to say you’re sorry every fifteen minutes” - John Lennon’s rebuttal.

One of the best I’ve seen was on a bookmark, words beside a crown of thorns - “Love means sacrifice.” The giving of ourselves for the sake of another - patterned on the love of Jesus. This is the foundation of the Christian life. And has direct bearing on the topic of prayer.

SCRIPTURE READING: 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION****SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

Whether you are thinking of campaigns in the world of politics or advertising, slogans can be helpful. You want to be careful, however, with the slogan you choose because they have power to shape perspectives. Some slogans are known and spoken. Others are silent but have power all the same. The silent ones often go unexamined. And they can get us into trouble.

One silent slogan that goes unexamined is “It’s Jesus and me.” But the Bible makes clear it’s not “Jesus and me” but “Jesus and those around me.” There is a corporate reality to the Christian life both in terms of who we are and how we grow. And this impacts everything. It changes how we read the Bible. The New Testament letters were mostly written to churches and were meant to be read with that in mind. Or think the of things we are to do with and for “one another,” something we can’t do in isolation from one another. So this changes how we read.

It also changes how we pray. Even when we are praying privately to the Father, we should have an awareness of our brothers and sisters. Think of the Lord’s Prayer. How does it begin? “Our Father...” And then the requests. “Give us this day...Forgive us our debts...Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.” There is a corporate reality to prayer.

We see that very thing in our text. And it is a vital thing for us to learn. Jesus calls us to pray with others in mind. Jesus calls us to pray with others in mind. And we need to learn from the models He gives. What is it Paul models for us? We see this, first, in his petitionary prayers. We see it, secondly, in his pastoral concern. And we see it, thirdly, in his passion for people.

I. PAUL’S PETITIONARY PRAYERS

Let’s move backwards through the text, starting with Paul’s petitionary prayers, what he asks with others in mind (**READ 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13**). There are two petitions and one goal.

A) The Two Petitions

1. To be with them

For starters, Paul wants to be with them. There's a bit of relational history between Paul and this church. He had planted it during his second missionary journey ([READ Acts 17:1-10a](#)). A few months later, Paul writes ([READ 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:5](#)). So you hear Paul's burden for these folks. He'd been torn from them and kept from returning. So he asks the Lord to clear the way.

2. An overflow of love among them

For he wants to be with them. And to see an overflow of love among them. There had been a few weeks to teach and train. But they lacked so much. So you might think that would be Paul's primary concern. But it's not. It's love - their love for each other and for their neighbor. His burden for them is an overflow of love. As Francis Schaeffer said, "Love is the final apologetic."

B) The One Goal

So those are the petitions, all with one goal in view ([READ 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13](#)).

1. Love and holiness

There is a tie between love and holiness. Love is the final apologetic. It is also the sum of the law. Obedience to God is living a life of love. The law guides our expressions of love. So, rightly understood, we never have to choose between law and love. They are complementary.

2. Holiness and Christ's return

So there is a tie between love and holiness. And then between holiness and Christ's return. Paul prays for their partial transformation now with eyes towards a complete transformation to come.

These are his petitionary prayers, what Paul prays for them. This is what he has in view.

Application:

Which begs the question, "How do we pray for one another?" Yes, of course, we should pay attention to what folks say they need. But clearly there are times we need to pray not just for what say they need but what they really need. We need to pray that we would grow in love, that our love for one another and others would increase and abound. All with the end in view.

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II. PAUL'S PASTORAL CONCERN

We have what Paul prays. But why? Pastoral concern ([READ 1 Thessalonians 3:8-10](#)).

A) His Commitment to Them

1. Truly bound together

Note the commitment he feels to them. They are truly bound together. There is no sense in which Paul has forgotten them, thinking "fend for yourself." He sees a union, a harnessing.

2. Deep commitment

Which drives this commitment. He knew their needs. And he was driven to meet those needs by whatever means were available. Ideally, face-to-face, but if need be, then by letter. And prayer.

Illustration:

What Paul pictures when he thinks of his relationship with these believers in that church was a pair of tandem climbers, scaling the face of mountain. They were bound together. The progress of one benefited the other. The fall of one was a detriment to the other. It was that real.

B) His Thankfulness for Them

That was his commitment to them. And it drove his thankfulness for them.

1. Grateful to God

First, Paul was grateful to God. He had heard news of their growth in the faith, standing firm in a storm of opposition. And he knew the ultimate source of that growth was the Lord Himself.

2. Encouragement to them

So he was grateful to God. And gave encouragement to them. He tells them. Paul does not fall prey to the false choice between empty flattery or stoic silence. No, he offers God-centered praise that gives credit where credit is due and draws attention to the change he sees in them.

This is the shape of Paul's pastoral concern. This is why he prays for them.

Application:

He is concerned for their spiritual flourishing, their health and growth in their relationship with Jesus. He is committed to this and thankful for it. And he's aware of all that they faced.

And so he prayed. We could all learn much from this as we consider our own prayer lives. Think how this should affect how we pray for young Christians or any who face difficult and challenging circumstances. Think of how this impacts how we can pray for them. And why.

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III. PAUL'S PASSION FOR PEOPLE

So we see what Paul prayed. And how that was driven by his concern for them. But why was he concerned? His passion for people, his love for them (**READ 1 Thessalonians 3:6-7**).

A) Paul, the Myth

Let's talk about Paul for a moment. He seems larger than life at times, almost mythical.

1. A physical description

We do have a description of his physical appearance. It comes from the 2nd c. (**READ quote**):

A man of middling size, and his hair was scanty, and his legs were a little crooked, and his knees were far apart; he had large eyes, and his eyebrows met, and his nose was somewhat long.

So Paul was a bald-headed, bowlegged short man with a big nose, and an unbroken eyebrow that lay across his forehead like a caterpillar. This may sound odd but I don't say it out of disrespect.

2. Our warped imagination

I say it to stress the earthiness and the history. I say it to push against our warped imagining Paul as all piety with no passion. Which is wrong and shows we haven't read Acts or his letters well.

B) Paul, the Man

Seriously, who was Paul really? Not Paul, the myth but Paul, the man?

1. Timothy's good news

You get an idea from this report of Timothy's "good news." That's an interesting way to put it for this is the one time in the New Testament that term is used not referring to what we think as the gospel itself. That's how large these folks loomed in Paul's heart. That's his love for them.

2. Paul's comfort

So we have Timothy's good news and then the comfort Paul felt in knowing how they were and how they still felt towards him. Amidst his distress and his affliction, Paul found comfort and encouragement in knowing how these dear ones were doing. And that was enough for him.

That's the real Paul. That was his love for them. And that's why he prayed for them.

Illustration:

So perhaps we need a *Mythbusters* episode devoted to this. Or let *Snopes* do some fact-checking. Or let some news agencies figure how many "Pinocchios" our myths of Paul are due.

Application:

Paul prayed because he was concerned for them. He was concerned for them because he loved them. Love is the root. Prayer is the fruit. So we have to ask, "Why don't we pray?"

There are a lot of possibilities as to the barriers to such prayer. We're too busy or feel spiritually dry. We're bitter or ashamed. We may be content with mediocrity. Or we just don't feel the need. Those are all possible barriers to prayer. But the greatest one is a lack of love.

So how do we grow in love? First, act as though you do. Don't wait for the mood to strike. Act as though you do, pray, and the heart will follow. Second, ask the Lord. Ask him to help you see how He sees others. And you. Ask Him to help you see and then to love. Just ask.

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CONCLUSION:

From time to time, you need to take your car to a mechanic for a wheel alignment. How do you know when it's time? Here are a few of the signs - uneven tread wear on your tires, the vehicle pulls to the right or left, your steering wheel is off center when driving straight, or there's vibration in the steering wheel. This alignment will mean an adjustment in the car's suspension. The key being to adjust the angle of the tires which affects how they make contact with the road. And how often should you have it done? Somewhere between every 3,000 and 6,000 miles.

Simple enough. But sometimes we ourselves need an alignment, a spiritual alignment. We're wearing out. We drift. We're off center. Perhaps there's even a shaking of sorts. What does it involve? Daily, hourly, continually coming back to the gospel of the kingdom. Who has come? What is coming? Who are we? How did that happen? And where do we go from here? We need to come back to that good news. Or, if I can put it another way, we need to come back to how we are loved, how we are able to love other people, and then with that, how to pray.

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