

1 Thessalonians 3:6–13 (ESV)

6 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— 7 for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. 8 For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. 9 For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, 10 as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith? 11 Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, 12 and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, 13 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.

We are now returning to 1 Thessalonians after 5 sermons on the topic of Sabbath keeping.

Remember that Paul had to leave the Thessalonians in a hurry. He was probably only there for a few weeks. We have been emphasizing that if we are to hope to have the **results** that Paul had, we should follow his example of **how he did** ministry. We must start with the **same** gospel. We will see more examples this morning of good solid ministry.

As we read our text this morning, keep an eye out for this. What was Paul **looking to see** in the Thessalonians? And what was Paul looking to **produce** in the Thessalonians? How did he know if he was having a **successful** ministry? And what did he do to **make** his ministry **more** successful?

We might ask, what kind of evangelism programs are they **starting**? What kind of evangelism programs are **they doing**? How many people are **coming to Christ**? How attractive are they making their **worship services**? We might come up with a list of evaluations. But what was Paul looking for?

6 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—

Timothy has come to us from you. That is about the most **personal** way this could be said. And this was **intentional**. It was more than just saying Timothy got back. Paul was saying that our connection to you Thessalonians just arrived. This was a warm way of connecting Timothy to both the Thessalonians and Paul's ministry team.

You and I need to be loved. Now sometimes we can create unrealistic expectations of what it **is to be loved** that are impossible for those around us to meet. So we have to be careful to not say we need to be loved the way we **expect** to be loved, or maybe at times we **demand** to be loved. But we all want to know we are special and important to **someone**.

Paul is conveying that in this letter to the Thessalonians. They are not just a ministry statistic to Paul. Like they are not church 7 of 20 churches in a certain area. No. They are the people that Timothy has come from with word of how they are doing.

What believers are there in your life that know that you will **go out of your way** to find out about them? Who knows you will **check up** on them, even if it is very costly for you to do so? That is the kind of ministry being represented here.

and has brought us the good news of your faith and love

The Greek word here for **good news** is used to describe **the gospel** in every other passage than this one in the Bible. This tells us something. We know that Paul was willing to die to present the good news of the gospel to the gentiles, or anyone for that matter. So this word, good news, is a sacred thing to Paul. He would not use it loosely.

For Paul to say that hearing that the Thessalonians are **doing well** in their **faith and love** is on par with **hearing the message of the gospel** is saying something. The best kind of ministry is an invested ministry. It is the kind of ministry that cares deeply about those it is ministering to. It is the kind of thing where our lives are **deeply enriched** to hear **those we love** are **doing well** and it **disturbs** our world when we hear they are **doing poorly**.

Now this verse says the “good news” is about **what** qualities? Their evangelism outreaches. Their worship services? What? What is it that Paul is looking for to see the spiritual progress of his disciples?

Faith and love.

Think about this.

These believers came to Christ through good solid doctrine which they believed. So the **core issues** were solid. Since that is true, Paul is **most** concerned about the believer’s **faith and love**. He was not concerned about peripheral issues. He wanted to make sure they were on track in their Christian growth. And these are two of the **core indicators**. Remember that Paul said in another place that the only thing that matters is **faith** expressing

itself in **love**. **That** is what is core. If people get **that** right, eventually they get **everything** right. If they get that **wrong**, eventually they get **everything** wrong. Faith is trust in the character of God to the place that we believe what He says and we obey what He commands.

Love reaches out to meet a need without regard to personal expense from a cheerful obedience to God.

If you want to know if a believer is doing well, look for **these things**. Apply this to anyone you disciple. Apply this to your children. Evaluate those around you by this. Faith and love are what you are **looking for**. It can look unconventional at times. It may be **uncouth** and be dressed in **odd clothes**. It may not know the Christian lingo. But if **this** is good, **everything** will eventually be good. Faith and love.

I found this quote from Richard D. Phillips and thought it was insightful.

According to Paul, then, what should we aim for in the Christian nurture of our children? The answer: growth in faith in God and love for others. What should be our goal in the discipleship of new believers? According to Paul, it is faith and love. How should we evaluate our own growth in grace? These two graces—faith and love—are the two issues on which my entire life depends. What is my life about? Is my life as a Christian defined by outward achievements, success in ministry, or the opinion of others about me? All these goals involve factors largely outside my control. Instead, my life is about faith and love: the goal of my growth in Christ is to learn to trust God more fully and to love others more genuinely. This is the true measure of a Christian man or woman: his or her faith toward Christ and love toward others. The same dynamics provide the apostolic measure of a healthy church.

Richard D. Phillips, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), 98–99.

We continue in our text.

and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us

Have you ever met with someone and you knew something between you and them had changed? Those of us who went through the dating scene know that feeling for sure. One day you were the beloved. The next the fidgeting and distance of our boyfriend or girlfriend gives away a **change of plan**. This is true in romantic relationships, but I can vividly recall those events in **ministry** as well. Someone seems to be on board with what you are trying to do, but then over time you get the feeling that they do not want to overcome

the differences they have with you. They are already out of the church. They just have not yet made it official.

I have gotten to the place where I sort of adopt the Fleetwood Mac mantra. **“You can go your own way.”** I am not confident that my heart is always in the right place like Paul’s was. But I have learned the signs of a person determined to leave.

I think this is all about why Paul was **so relieved**. These people knew who loved them. They were sticking to true doctrine. They had rejected their false lovers. They were true to the gospel. And they loved those who were **telling them the truth**.

What a relief that must have been. This is easy to understand why Paul would have been so happy. You never want to leave a **new convert** in the hands of a **Judaizer**. They have so many good punch lines and it is difficult to understand how they are wrong. They are quoting the Bible, after all. And it was the Judiazers that were hounding Paul’s steps.

as we long to see you—

Paul is letting these folks know, feelings are mutual. He was not being coy or fleshly trying to protect himself from potential hurt from these folks. He let them know that they are important to him and his ministry team.

7 for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith.

Paul was facing a lot of turmoil. Think about this. How would you feel if your people were continually not only rejecting you but hunting you down to do you harm? These people who were hurting him were people who Paul could relate to. He was previously one of them. And they are hounding his steps.

Everywhere he goes they follow and they say, you are a fool to follow Paul. He is not a Jew. He used to be, but he was kicked out for having false doctrine. We have the inside scoop. We know what true spirituality is all about. We know the law frontwards and backwards. We will help you undo the harm that Paul has done to you.

And Paul faces this **everywhere** he goes. And people hate him to the point they hope to **kill him** and they view **killing him** as being **good** in God’s eyes. That is the kind of pressure Paul was used to facing. That is distress and affliction.

And then he does ministry like he did in Thessalonica and he does not know how it will turn out. He does not know if his enemies will be successful in turning these people **against** him.

But he gets back news and all the news is **good**. These people were not drawn back into a Judaism of works. No. They are clinging to Christ in faith. That is reason for celebration.

8 For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord.

Here is the kind of pastors and elders you want to have. They are only **really living** if **you** are flourishing in the faith. That is really what this passage means. Paul is saying, now I am really living. This is the best thing in life, to have my spiritual children flourishing.

Again, how does Paul measure success in his ministry?

He measures it by the degree that his disciples are **standing fast in the Lord**.

And what are the **top factors** he looks at? The status of their **faith** and the status of their **love**. Which isn't strange. What were the top things Christ taught **His** followers? That they must believe in Him and love one another.

9 For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God,

I think this question could be restated, "How can we thank God enough after we are so thrilled to find out you are doing so well in Christ?"

Do you have an example like this in your life? It would be a time you are so fearful of hearing **bad news** about someone... and then you find out very good news. We might all have a story like this- of relieved joy.

You probably know this feeling. You just cannot possibly thank God enough for His answer to your prayers.

Notice that this joy is really a natural kind of happiness that stems from good news. The one difference between **this** example and the happiness that any **non believer** might have is that **we know who to thank for it**. It draws our attention to God to give thanks to Him. That is always a good response.

10 as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

I like how Paul words this. It is as if to say, we are **always praying for you**.

But we are not always receiving **good news** from you. So as we pray for you like we always do, now we have the added pleasure of knowing God has taken care of you.

I trust that we pray for each other. I hope that is a regular thing for us. If it is not, maybe that is the missing peace that is needed for some us to turn the

corner on the difficult struggles we face in our lives. Paul seemed to think it was **always necessary**. Even when he finds out that the people are doing well, that just gives him **more reason** to pray. I think we can see a principle here. People **always** need prayed for. Because they **always need God's help** in their lives.

Paul wanted desperately to revisit these people. So he and his team were praying for this.

Now look what Paul was praying for.

He was like Isaiah in Isaiah 6. **Lord send me.**

So back to our original question- How was Paul evaluating this church?

When Paul was looking for spiritual health in a church, he looked for the members to be standing fast in the Lord in faith and love.

When Paul determined what they needed, it was to supply what was lacking in their faith.

I think it is good for us to see the **nature** of a **godly leader**. He prays to be able to **see** these people. Is it so they can make him feel even better about how they are doing? No. Is it so **they** can do something **for him**? No. He wants to come because **they have needs** that **he knows about** and he wants to **meet** them.

Paul wants to come so he can give.

That is the quality to look for in ministers, in leaders. Look for someone whose **first instinct** is to look around for those in need of what **he has to give**. This person will be continually scanning the environment to see needs. He or she will look for ways they can use what **God has given them** for the benefit of **someone else**.

When is the last time you reached out to meet a need in someone simply because you **saw the need**, prayed that God would **give you the opportunity to meet it**, and you **took the opportunity** when it arrived. Some of the most significant ministry is done by the **most boring people** just doing the thing that **God reveals** for them to do. Being with someone requires very little skill. Well Paul is looking for the chance to **supply what is lacking in your faith**. Faith is not something that exists by itself. It functions on mental content. It must have something solid to have faith in. So when we supply what is lacking in someone's faith, we are ministering **God's truth** to them. We are **opening the Word** to them. And often it is not complicated. Sometimes we share something we learned about how to apply God's word to our situations.

Paul wanted another crack at this with the Thessalonians. He could have been content to do it remotely. There would have been less bother and danger. But he knew face to face was better. So that is what he prayed for.

11 Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you,

From what I understand, the Greek language in this passage shows just one more evidence of the deity of Christ.

Look here at Paul's understanding of God's will. He prays. He does not **know** if God will do it or not. But this is what He asks for. Should you only pray for those things you **know** that God will answer? It does not look like that is how Paul is praying. Should you pray, **demanding** that God will do everything you ask because you **stamp Jesus's name on it**? That doesn't seem to be what Paul is doing. Paul thinks it would do the Thessalonians good for him to visit, so he asks God to direct Paul there. Does it happen? Yeah probably. Acts says that Paul's team does visit the general vicinity in a later missionary trip. So God probably answered the prayer.

It is important, I think, to see that Paul was **following God's direction**. We don't know exactly how Paul knew the correct steps each step of the way. Sometimes he received supernatural guidance. But that seems to be the exception to the rule. Often Paul made plans and then God changed them through circumstances. But Paul knows, no matter how it happens, that God **is directing** and Paul is **submitting** to God's direction.

12 and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you,

Here is another helpful thing to notice. Paul does not act like the Thessalonians spiritual growth relies solely upon Paul. Paul knows he serves a big God. Paul is sometimes a **means** that Christ does things through. Sometimes He accomplishes those things **without** Paul's involvement. That is a very good attitude to have in the ministry. We should meet every need that we **can** with our best efforts. That is **our** part to play.

But even while we work, we know that the result is not ultimately up to us. It is the Lord that must make people increase and abound in love for one another **inside** the church and the world **outside** the church. So that is Paul's prayer. Paul does not think that if I cannot get to you, God's hands are tied. Not at all. The Lord can easily increase their love.

But if Paul has **the chance** he wants to be **a means** of helping them do what Paul prays for them for.

Now note again what he is praying for.

It is impossible to read the New Testament and miss the important things because they are stated over and over again. We do well to evaluate theological positions to see if they focus on the same things that the Epistles focus on and with the same **persistence** and **consistency**. We cannot allow a small concept or precept in scripture to be blown up to be a primary focus of our ministries. Paul's letters and the rest of the New Testament focus on who we are in Christ **first**. And then it moves on to how we should **live** as a result of that. And **loving our brothers and sisters in Christ** and **having faith in Christ for our salvation and our sustenance** are always the beginning focal points. Smaller points are only brought to bear later in light of the core of the gospel. And they are always a result of faith in Christ, never a source of our salvation.

In the church, love must be the **priority**, as long as it is under the umbrella of **faith in Christ**. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love. That is core.

13 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.

The progression here is interesting.

As we supply **what is lacking in your faith** and the Lord increases your **love for one another**, this being done should work toward your **hearts being established** in a way that no charge can be held against them and stick. That is essentially what blameless means. It does not mean sinless. But it does mean that you cannot be accused of a state of habitual sin. Blameless in holiness means a track record moving in the right direction. It is moving from habitual sin to godly obedience. It is moving from **giving in** to the flesh to **saying no** to the flesh. That is what we are talking about here.

Established means to turn resolutely in a certain direction. So Paul is describing the process of becoming **more resolute** in having set apart **attitudes** and set apart **actions**. RC Sproul would call this living actively and intentionally in the presence of God.

It is God who does that in us. And it is God who moves in us to will and to do according to His good purposes. He enables it. He initiates it. He activates it. And we find ourselves struggling **to do it** because of everything He **has already done**. We work BECAUSE He works.

And where is the pay day?

Where do we find this all to be true?

What day do we live for looking forward to God **finalizing** all of this?

What day must we consider, because it will be a day when no amount of acting or deception will have any effect. It will be the day of truth.

at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints

Let me ask you this. At first it might seem like I have veered from the topic, but I will show you why I don't think I have later.

How often do you, without hesitation or consideration, **believe** your **internal defense attorney**? That part of you that automatically comes up with a good reason for your behavior, how your behavior is justified? How often have you jumped on his **overly optimistic theories** for why you **may have done** something that is being called into question? How often do you explain your behavior on some vague idea or concept instead of letting the hound of heaven track down the real reason?

The degree of **holiness** a person reaches is limited by the **lack of courage one has to know and tell the truth** about one's self. It is impossible to **confess** a sin that you won't **admit to yourself**. We have all learned ways since we were kids that will **get us off the hook**. Maybe we **play dumb**. Maybe we philosophically pontificate until our questioners give up. Maybe we **lay out red herrings** to get the dogs off our scent. Maybe we react with anger to **make anyone pay** who has the gall to question our actions. Maybe we believe a theory about our behavior and back it as if it is the absolute proof. Maybe we act like we are **too weak** to actually pursue the truth. It hurts us too much. We cannot bear it.

The question comes down to, will you **have the courage** to **discover the truth** and to **tell the truth** about **what** you do and **why** you do it? Holiness will only happen to the degree that you will.

Why do I bring this up?

When we stand before Christ, everything will be clear. All the ways we could avoid human intrusion or self-revelation will show up as exactly what they are. **Deception**. God has never been fooled.

So even if we can convince **everyone around us** that we are functioning wonderfully with the purist of motives, the cover will be removed when we stand before Christ. We would all do well to live today as if everything we say and do will be revealed. We would do well to orient to truth. Because that is the path to holiness. God never works to make a person to **appear** holy. He works to **make them** Holy. And walking in the light as He is in the light is how it is done. And walking in the light is freeing. We get to quit **running from**

things. We do not have the **stress** that comes with **pretending.** Our relationships will often improve because of the genuineness that comes with being real. And when people love us, we will know they love the **real** us. That is the kind of love our souls long for. When we try to **work hard to win** someone's love, we will always have to **keep working** to **keep** their love. But when they **know who we are** and they love us **anyway**, then we are truly loved. And that is frighteningly wonderful.

Christ is coming.

And what will be important then is that you are walking in real faith and that you are really loving one another. We have a few days to supply what is lacking in our faith. We have God's word. We have each other. That is **way better** than any excuses we might have.

God will **establish your hearts blameless in holiness.** That is His will for your life.

And every step in that direction is more preparation for the day when all will be laid bare.

at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints

While I hope we all look forward to that day for the eternal advantages it will bring us, may we all also live in such a way that the revelation of the truth will show faith and love ruling the day in our lives.

One application from today's text could be simply this.

Can I go through **one day** telling **myself** and **everyone else** only the truth?

Or maybe you have been convicted of a more direct application. I would challenge us to write down whatever God has laid on our hearts **to do** it and commit this week to **doing it.**