

**THE HEALTHY CHURCH AND CHRISTIAN LOVE
1 THESSALONIANS 2:17-3:13**

I. There is a lot of talk in our world today about love. Much of it is cheap. Much of it is shallow. Love is too often related to a craving for a particular food, to an emotional feeling, to a physical act.

Jean Jacques Rousseau was an influential Swiss philosopher who lived in the 1700s. Historian Paul Johnson claims that Rousseau was the first modern intellectual to proclaim himself to be the "friend of all mankind." Rousseau, who spent much of his life in Paris, made declarations concerning his capacity for love such as this:

"No one ever had more talent for loving."

"The person who can love me as I can love is still to be born."

This lover of mankind had five children by his mistress. He dropped each one of them off at the door of an orphanage in Paris where 85% of all of its residents died before reaching adulthood. Rousseau's foster mother rescued him from financial destitution on four different occasions. Yet in her old age Rousseau abandoned her. Rousseau was notorious for not repaying his debts. He turned on most of his friends. One of these former friends, a Dr. Tronchin of Geneva, once commented, "How is it possible that the friend of mankind is no longer the friend of men, or scarcely so?"

Such behavior should be anathema among Christians. We Christians are supposed to be specialists in love. Jesus said in John 13, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Love is a complicated and multifaceted subject. There is much in our world that passes as love that is not the genuine item. The Bible gives

us considerable information about what is genuine. The passage before us this morning is especially helpful in telling us what Christian love looks like. We have already seen in our study of 1 Thessalonians that it is an essential ingredient for a healthy church.

In the last few weeks we have been studying Paul's First Epistle to the Thessalonians. We have seen that Paul and Silas and Timothy started this church in Greece on Paul's second missionary journey in about 49 AD. The Jews and pagans in Thessalonica forced him out of the city after a visit there of only a couple of months. When Paul was later in Corinth, he got a report from his assistant Timothy that the Thessalonian church was doing well.

So Paul sent this letter back to the Christians there. He called the young church a model church. Though it was young, and not large, it was a healthy church. He commends the young Christians there for their faith, their love and their hope. In #2 we have seen that the apostle Paul says that a healthy church embraces and lives out the Word of God. Now in our passage we find out what healthy love looks like among Christians.

II. We will begin by looking at the last four verses of #2, where we find that **HEALTHY LOVE PRIORITIZES PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**.

Paul has just been describing Jewish persecutors who have hindered the spread of the gospel. He now contrasts their behavior with that of the Christian missionaries. In v. 17 he writes, "But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face..."

Earlier in #2 Paul was making a defense of his ministry among the Thessalonians. Perhaps critics outside of the church were claiming that these Christian missionaries were like other religious hucksters and philosophers who traveled around trying to take advantage of people. Perhaps they charged that Paul and crew would never be back. Paul says

that the reality is that they have a strong desire to see the Thessalonians again.

The original term for "torn away" was used by the Greeks of parents who lost their children. The idea is that Paul was forced out of Thessalonica against his will. He did not want to leave in the first place, and he wants to come back to them.

According to v. 18, "...because we wanted to come to you--- I, Paul, again and again--- but Satan hindered us." All three of the Christian leaders wanted to revisit Thessalonica. Timothy, and perhaps Silas, have since been back, but Paul has not been able to return.

Paul has not been able to go back because Satan hindered him. The nature of this hindrance is not stated. It could have to do with the fact that the Christians in Thessalonica had to put up some kind of bond because of the rioting over the Christians. If Paul shows up, a guy named Jason, along with other Christians, might lose a whole lot of money. It could be that health problems had kept Paul from returning. Perhaps there were other circumstances involved.

Whatever the specific situation was, Paul traces the cause of the problem to Satan. In #2 v. 2 Paul indicates that government officials had caused him difficulty. In #2 vv. 14-16 Paul says that there were persecutors who hindered his Christian mission. Now he speaks of Satan as opposing his plans.

On one hand we need to guard against the notion that Satan is the counterpart to Jesus, that he is somehow on a par with the Son of God. He is not. He is a created being. He is not omniscient or omnipresent or omnipotent.

On the other hand we need to recognize that he is not a mythical figure. He is powerful. He is real. He is a person, not a force, like the dark side of the Force. He leads the demonic spirits. Satan always seeks to thwart the will of God.

Paul at this time has a key role in the plan of God for the world. So Satan may well have had direct involvement in seeking to oppose Paul. He may well have been using circumstances and people and unseen forces to accomplish his desires. John Calvin writes, "Whenever the ungodly cause us trouble, they are fighting under the banner of Satan, and are his instruments for harassing us."

Satan often looks for the weakest link in a family or a church or an organization. He looks for the person who is angry, who has a grudge, who is involved in some kind of sin. Then he, or his forces, prompt and motivate that individual to focus selfishly on his or her hurt or perceived mistreatment. He then motivates that individual toward action that may cause all kinds of havoc. What typically suffers is Christian love.

In vv. 19 & 20 Paul adds, "For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy." The apostle is looking forward to the Second Coming. The term is *parousia*, which was often used by the Greeks of the visit to a city by an important person, such as a king.

In a royal visit to a town the king might hand out rewards or honors to some of his subjects. But here Paul regards the Thessalonian Christians as rewards in themselves. He has had a part in bringing them to faith in Jesus. He has invested in their lives. So he experiences joy at the anticipation that at the Second Coming of the Great King, these people will be present. Their presence on this future occasion will be a reward for the love that he has invested in their individual lives.

How many of you have seen the movie "Mr. Holland's Opus?" It is a movie that has a worthwhile message. Richard Dreyfuss is Mr. Holland. Mr. Holland is a musician whose goal in life is to write a great symphony and to become famous. But to support himself he takes a job as a high school music teacher. He hopes to work on his opus on the side. But life intrudes. He gets married. He has kids. He starts to get involved with the kids at school. He shares his passion for music with them. So it takes Mr. Holland his whole life to write this symphony and it never gets published or produced.

Budget cuts at school force Mr. Holland into early retirement. He is a disappointed man. But unknown to him, his wife and child have given the music for his opus to alumni from the school who return to play for him at his retirement party. Before he is given the baton to lead these alumni in playing his opus, the governor of the state, who went through his music program, says this to the audience:

"Mr. Holland had a profound influence on my life and on a lot of lives I know. But I have a feeling that he considers a great part of his own life misspent. Rumor had it he was always working on this symphony of his. And this was going to make him famous, rich, probably both. But Mr. Holland isn't rich and he isn't famous, at least not outside of our little town. So it might be easy for him to think himself a failure. But he would be wrong, because I think that he's achieved a success far beyond riches and fame. Look around you. There is not a life in this room that you have not touched, and each of us is a better person because of you. We are your symphony, Mr. Holland. We are the melodies and the notes of your opus. We are the music of your life."

In a similar way it is the investments that we have made in other people that will count in our final judgment. The money that we have made and the earthly rewards we have gained will not matter. It is the efforts that we have made to point family and friends and co-workers and neighbors toward Jesus. It is the practical love that we have shown toward people that will count in the end. It is our willingness to help out with Vacation Bible School, to pray in secret for lost people around us, to give rides to the

elderly, to give attention to our kids and grandkids, to visit the sick and imprisoned and widowed. In the end this will be the music of our life. Healthy love prioritizes personal relationships.

III. In vv. 1-5 of #3 we also find that **HEALTHY LOVE IS CONCERNED ABOUT APOSTASY**. In the first two verses we read, "Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith..."

In Thessalonica those opposed to the gospel caused a riot, and Paul was forced to leave town. Silas went with Paul. Timothy probably stayed a bit longer in Thessalonica.

Paul and Silas went to Berea. Again there was a riot. Paul again had to leave town. Silas stayed for a while. Paul went alone to Athens. He preached in the synagogue and in the market place. In neither place was there a good response to the gospel. Timothy and Silas caught up to Paul there in Athens. Timothy was sent back to Thessalonica to check on the church there. A bit later Silas was sent to Philippi to check on the Christians there. Paul went on by himself to Corinth, to the west of Athens.

Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica, according to vv. 3 & 4, "...that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know." The original Greek word for "moved" means "to be unsettled," or "to be shaken up."

The specific nature of the afflictions experienced by the Thessalonians is not described. It seems to have involved some form of persecution for their new Christian faith. It may have meant family rejection or social pressure or job discrimination or actual physical attack. Paul and company had warned them about this at the beginning. In 2 Timothy #3 v. 12, he would later write,

"Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted..."

The danger that persecution poses is that some will be shaken, or perhaps led astray. Jesus in the parable of the soils talked about the danger that persecution poses. In Mark #4 he explained the response of one kind of person to the gospel, saying, "And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away."

Paul and his companions were in Thessalonica for just a short time before they were forced out of town. So he was understandably concerned about the spiritual well-being of the new Christians there. He knew that they faced opposition of some kind. He knew that there were many negative influences in their environment. He knew that they had limited Christian support. He was concerned that some could fall away.

Thus he adds in v. 5, "For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain." Paul makes reference again to Satan. He calls him "the tempter."

For whatever reason, Paul cannot go to Thessalonica himself. So he sends young Timothy as his representative. He wants to see that the Christians there are encouraged, that they resist any temptation to stray from the faith, that they not fall into apostasy.

A healthy Christian love will always be concerned about Christians who are on the margins, who are faced with extra temptation, who are dealing with addictions, who are tempted to go astray. We parents and grandparents are concerned about kids and grandkids who go away to college, who move away from home to get jobs. Healthy love for these people will be reflected

in regular prayer for them and in giving encouragement to such people to keep following the Lord.

There was a bright guy in our youth group some years ago when I had a brief stint as interim youth leader. He was going away to college to study science. I showed him a couple of quality videos put together by scientists who were Christians. Since then I have occasionally sent him articles about scientists who are Christians. When he comes home on vacation, I try to take him out for lunch or breakfast. He is going into a graduate program in astrophysics. So I know that he is going to face opposition to his Christian beliefs. I don't want to see him fall away from his Christian commitment.

The point is that healthy love is concerned about apostasy. In a healthy church we will be on the lookout for people who are tempted to stray away. We will pray for them and reach out to them to encourage them in the faith.

IV. In vv. 6-10 we find that HEALTHY LOVE SEEKS SPIRITUAL MATURITY. Paul writes in vv. 6 & 7, "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."

It was this report from Timothy about the situation in Thessalonica that prompted this letter. The church there was not a perfect church. It was a church filled with new Christians. But it was a model church because of its faith, its love and its hope.

Paul calls the report from Timothy "good news." In Greek this is the same term that is used elsewhere by Paul of the gospel. Paul had been through difficult experiences. He had been kicked out of Thessalonica. He had been kicked out of Berea. He had received a cold response from the Athenians. Now he was in Corinth. So this report that the church was doing well in Thessalonica was great news. It was also encouraging to hear that the

Christians there really missed Paul. Christian workers need reports like that once in a while.

Paul adds in v. 8, "For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord." To know that Christians whom he has evangelized and taught are going on with the Lord is a great source of encouragement for Paul. It will continue to be a source of encouragement for him as long as they continue on with the Lord.

A year or two ago I got a Facebook message out of the blue from a guy named Jeff. Almost forty years ago I had done a summer internship in a church in Ohio. I played tennis with Jeff and shared the gospel with him. He seemed to respond favorably. So now he sent me a message thanking me for having taken the time to explain how he could go to heaven by trusting in Jesus. It is a big encouragement to get reports like that.

The Woods occasionally get such reports from Brazil from people among whom they worked for many years. Last Sunday you heard stories from Don about people who have come to faith behind bars. There are others of you who have had a part in this prison ministry. We really live when we hear stories like this about people who are moving on toward spiritual maturity.

Back in vv. 9 & 10 we read, "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?"

Notice that it is on account of what is happening among the Thessalonian Christians that Paul rejoices. But it is to God that his thanks are directed. For he realizes that the ongoing change in their lives is the result of the working of God.

Paul is also praying that he may be able to see them. The Thessalonians may be part of a healthy church. But they are still young Christians. They have a lot more maturing to do. There are more things that they need to know. Paul would like to be involved in teaching them some of these things. At this point his only recourse is to pray about it. He prays about it regularly, earnestly and specifically.

Paul apparently does not pray that their afflictions will go away. That is often the focus of our prayers, isn't it? Paul believes that afflictions are part of the Christian life. Besides praying that he may be able to see them again, he prays that they will stand firm in the face of these challenges.

Real love desires to see others come to faith in Christ and grow to maturity in that faith. Genuine love in parents for their children desires to see them grow and become independent of parents and dependent on God. Occasionally we may encounter parents who try to keep their children dependent upon them. They do it through manipulation or through using finances or through using guilt or whatever. This is often passed off as love. But it is really self-centeredness. A similar thing can happen in the spiritual realm. Real love desires to see others mature and become less dependent upon us and more dependent upon the Lord.

V. Finally, in vv. 11-13 of #3 we find that HEALTHY LOVE PROMOTES MORE CHRISTIAN LOVE. The apostle writes in v. 11, "Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you..."

Paul is making it very clear that he wants to visit Thessalonica. He also recognizes that it is only God who can pull that off. He is sovereign over Paul's journeys. He is sovereign over our journeys. He is more than just a signpost or a kindly bystander who gives us directions. He is in charge of the course of our lives. We learn from the Book of Acts that probably Paul did make it back to Thessalonica on his third missionary journey, but it was several years later before it happened.

There is one grammatical feature about v. 11 that has theological significance. The verb "direct" is singular, but the subject is plural. The subject of the verb includes God the Father and God the Son. Yet Paul sees a unity in these two that causes him to use a verb that is singular rather than plural. This points us toward the unity of the Godhead and toward the deity of Jesus.

Verse 12 says, "...and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you..." The term "Lord" is normally used by Paul of Jesus.

Here also we are reminded of the complex nature of love. It is not something that we humans can ever master with perfection. Once in a while in Olympic competition we see a gymnast or a figure skater or a diver get a perfect score. The implication is that this competitor has achieved perfection. There really is no room for improvement. That is not the case with love. We humans always have room for growth in love. Paul's prayer is that the Thessalonian Christians will continue to grow.

The objects of love are "one another" and "all." The first priority is love for other Christians. Jesus said, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." In Galatians # 6 v. 10 Paul said, "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." Fellow believers are to have priority. We have to look out for family.

But we cannot forget unbelievers. The best way to show love to them is to share the gospel with them. That is what they need most. But our responsibility is not limited to that. We are to love our neighbors as ourselves. As Jesus showed in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, our neighbor includes those who come across our path and have a need that we can meet. In our modern world that path has taken us far beyond our own immediate community.

Paul's focus here, however, is upon seeing fellow Christians grow in their demonstration of love. We want others to be better lovers. This is not for some personal advantage that we might get from them. It is so that the cause of Christ and His kingdom may be advanced.

In v. 13 he concludes, "...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 all have a goal, a deadline, a limitation. We will either die, or Christ will come back for us first. In either case there will be an evaluation of our lives by Christ. Paul is talking here about Christians, about people who have trusted in Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. The issue is not where these people will spend eternity. The issue is what kind of rewards Christians will receive for their service.

This evaluation and giving of rewards will happen in connection with the coming of the Lord. There is some confusion in regard to the coming of the Lord in that the New Testament seems to speak of two comings, or at least two aspects of that coming. For we will see in the next chapter that Jesus will return at the rapture to raise the saints from the dead and to take Christians from off of the earth. Then seven years later He will return to the earth physically to set up His kingdom.

The coming here seems to involve the rapture and the judgment of Christians that follows it. There is some uncertainty about what Paul means by the word "saints." The term literally is "holy ones." Some think that Paul is talking about Christians who have died. Others think that this is a reference to angels. I suspect that he may be referring to both angels and Christians. Other Scriptures seem to indicate that both angels and saints who have died will be involved with His second coming.

John Perkins grew up in the segregationist South. As a teenager, he watched helplessly as his older brother, a newly decorated WW II hero, was beaten by white police officers in front of a movie theater. He grew up with anger toward white people

At age 17 he moved to California and got a good job as a steel plant worker. He raised a family and thought a lot about politics and racism. His four year old son attended a neighborhood Bible club and came home talking about the forgiveness of God. That struck a chord with John Perkins, and he started going to church. He became a Christian. An elder in the church took an interest in John and took him under his wing. This older man showed him love. Perkins says, "Here I was, a young guy with a third-grade education, and this old white man teaches me the Bible and says things like, 'You will be preaching all over the United States.'"

In 1960 Perkins moved back to Mississippi. He got involved in the Civil Rights Movement. He founded church-run day care centers, legal centers, and one of the state's first medical centers that allowed both black and white families in the same waiting room. In 1970 he was thrown into jail for helping to organize a civil rights march. Behind bars white officers beat him. He says, "I saw what hate had done to them and I saw their depravity. But I was also conscious of the depravity in myself. Had I not seen the same thing in me, I would have turned to blame as a comfort. Instead, I saw the truth and the truth was that I also was a bad actor."

Perkins decided that Christian love was the appropriate response. People needed to be reconciled to God and to each other. For the next forty years he preached the gospel through community centers across Mississippi. In February 1980, exactly ten years to the day after he had been beaten, he was named outstanding religious leader of the year by the governor of Mississippi. Perkins says, "When I became a Christian, I began to work for the greater good. Before the greater good was my survival. Now the greater good is the kingdom of God."

John Perkins and the man who disciplined him are great examples of Christian love. They demonstrated that healthy love prioritizes personal relationships, is concerned about apostasy, seeks spiritual maturity and promotes more Christian love. That is the kind of love that Paul promoted. It is the kind of love that we should seek to emulate.