

“Transforming Prayer: How Everything Changes When We Seek The Face of God – Part 3”

I Thessalonians 3:9-13

~ Delivered at DHBC on September 22, 2013 (Soli Deo Gloria)

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Please open your Bibles to I Thessalonians 3. **READ 9-13.**
- Learning to pray is the easiest thing in the world. It is no different than when a child begins to speak to their parents. Just as a parent delights to hear their child speaking to them, so God delights to hear his children speak to Him.
 - We have been saying however that just as children need to mature in their communication with their parents so we must learn to mature in prayer. One of the most obvious areas children need to mature is in thinking of others and not just themselves.
 - Like the kid who prayed, **“Dear God, thank You for the baby brother but what I actually prayed for was a puppy.”**
- Maturing in prayer means learning to pray for others and not just ourselves. This is one feature that you cannot help but notice in all of Paul’s prayers and particularly in this one. He models a deep love and profound concern for others.
 - This is striking because he hardly knows the Thessalonians. If you read Acts 17 you can see that Paul was only in Thessalonica a short time before severe opposition forced him to flee. Even this this was a brand new church they were apparently doing very well.
 - Look at the praise Paul gives them back in 1:7. **READ 1:7 - “And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere.”**
- Although Paul is away from them he is greatly pained that he did not have time to disciple and train them. He is worried that their young faith will crumble under the pressure. Look over at 2:17. Listen to his intensity of concern for them. **READ 2:17 - “But, brothers, when we were torn away from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you.”**
 - But Paul was not able to see them. And so out great concern for them he sent Timothy to find out how they were doing. Look at 3:5. **READ 3:5 - “For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless.”**
- Can you see how much love Paul has for these believers whom he hardly knows? He desperately wants to see them established in the faith. Paul may be a great intellect and theologian but he also loves people. Since he can’t be with them he wants them to know that he is praying for them.
 - What we pray about is one of the greatest indicators of what we really care about. How about you? What do your requests reveal about what you

value? How much do other people come into your prayers? Surely this is an area we all need to mature in.

- Paul's prayer is a marvelous guide for this. From it we will see four ways to grow in our prayer for others.

THANKING GOD FOR OTHER BELIEVERS

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** First then, to grow in our prayers for other people we must thank God for them while expressing this thankfulness to them.
 - Look at verse 9. **READ 9** – *“How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?”* Are you starting to see a theme in Paul's prayers? Thankfulness is a prime mark of his prayer life. In fact, this is the third time in this letter he has thanked God for the Thessalonian Christians.
 - Look back at 1:2. **READ 2** – *“We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers.”* Now look at 2:13. **READ 13** – *“And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God.”*
- Paul has already thanked God twice for them. Why do it again? Because when your primary drive in life is to live for Christ and you see those you love living for Christ, you cannot help but overflow with thanksgiving to God when there is evidence that they are doing well.
 - We see this passion for people in the second half verse 9 as well. **READ 9** - *“How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?”*
 - In other words, what makes Paul smile, what give Paul great joy is seeing others doing well in the faith. He is saying, *“Thessalonians, how can I ever pay you back? You have given me so much joy as I pray about you that I feel I owe you something.”* What a heart for people Paul has!
- You know you are maturing in Christ when you are constantly thanking God for what he is doing in the lives of other people.
 - Some Christians I meet seem only to want to talk about what is wrong. What is wrong in the church, wrong in other people's lives, and wrong in society. They love denounce the evils of society, express concern for those in sin, and try to fix what is broken. But you don't hear them rejoicing and talking about all the good things that are going on.
 - So what makes you excited? Are your prayers filled with thanksgiving for others? Growing in prayer means rejoicing and thanking God for what he is doing in other people's lives.
- But let's go a little deeper. Notice that Paul does tell God what he is thankful for. He also tells the Thessalonians what he is thanking God for in their lives.
 - Many Christians say you should not thank other people because it could go to their heads. My own grandparents were like this. They were rock solid and mature Christians but my mom says they would never praise or

- encourage her when as a child she sang in church or played the piano. The reason was they did not want it to go to her head.
- But notice that Paul sees no problem with giving the glory to God and encouragement to the Christian. He gives God the glory by thanking him for what is going on but he then tells them what he is so thankful for. So in the end they feel encouraged and God gets the praise.
 - Even secular writers understand the power of encouragement. Ken Blanchard, the consultant and writer about business and leadership method wrote a famous book entitled, *The One Minute Manager*. He made popular the idea that leaders and managers should do a better job of communicating, encouraging, those under them. He particularly told people write down words of encouragement because written words have more power.
 - Paul was doing this 2000 years ago. When you are praying and thanking God for others, tell them what you are thankful for. Write an email. Write a letter. Make a phone call. Tell them in person.
 - Let us be a church that pours out thanksgiving to God and encouragement to each other.
 - Courtney, I thank God regularly for your tremendous artistic and graphic design abilities. What a gift you are to this church!
 - Ken and Carol, how often I have thanked God for your acts of service and your genuine love for Christ.
 - Roberta, I cannot thank God enough for how spiritually mature I have seen you become in the past few years.
 - Kirsten, I am so blessed by your musical gifts. I regularly thank God for how you bless us.
 - Mike and Ellie, how grateful I am for you. Your consistent walk with God, your servant hearts, and love for Christ are an example to us all.
 - So that is the first point. To grow in our prayers for other people we must thank God for them while expressing this thankfulness to them.

SET ASIDE TIME TO EARNESTLY PRAY FOR OTHERS

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Second, to grow in our prayers for other people we must set aside time to earnestly pray for them.
 - Look at verse 10-11. **READ 10-11** – *“Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again.”*
- One of the great benefits of this series is that we are beginning to see themes in Paul. Here again, we see that Paul has regular set times of prayer. When he says *“night and day we pray”* don’t go thinking that he is a monk praying 24 hours a day. He is not saying that he never works or eats or drinks. Don’t over spiritualize this. Surely he does pray throughout the day while he is working or walking or talking. But he has set times of pray in the day and night. It is during these times that he remembers other people.

- Early African converts to Christianity were earnest and regular in private devotions. Each one reportedly had a separate spot in the thicket where he would pour out his heart to God. Over time the paths to these places became well worn. As a result, if one of these believers began to neglect prayer, it was soon apparent to the others. They would kindly remind the negligent one, ***“Brother, the grass grows on your path.”***
 - Brothers and sisters, if you want to mature in prayer there is really only one way to do it and that is to pray. Books and sermons will help but we learn to pray by praying.
- Over the past few weeks I have been suggesting that if you have no regular prayer life that you begin with 15 minutes. By I have rightly been questioned about this. Some have asked how can we possibly pray like Paul with only 15 minutes a day? You can’t. But it is a start. One of the worst things you can do is say, ***“Unless I pray for one hour I am a failure.”*** No one calls a child a failure because they can only talk about one subject for 2 minutes. Start there and as you grow you will want to add time.
 - And note also that Paul says he is earnest in his prayers. This is evidence of his deep love for them. In Romans 15:30 Paul says, ***“I appeal to you, brothers...to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf.”*** Strive in prayer. Does this reflect your prayers for others? Do you struggle together with others in prayer? Do you cry out to God for other people? Is earnestness a mark of your prayer life?
 - We have a dear friend who is struggling deeply with suicide and is again in the hospital after another attempted overdose. ***“Father, I cry out to you. Deliver her. Father, free her from this. Oh Lord, have mercy. Fill her with hope.”***
 - To grow in our prayers for other people we must set aside time to earnestly pray for them.

ASKING TO PLAY A PART IN STRENGTHENING THE FAITH OF OTHERS

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Third, to grow in our prayers for other people we must ask that we might play a part in strengthening their faith.
 - Look at verse 10-11. ***READ 10-11 – “Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith. Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you.”***
- This lack in their faith is not because they are living in sin. They are lacking because they don’t know certain truths. Paul was only there a short time. We know from this letter that they did not rightly understand the second coming of Jesus. They thought that if a person died they would miss his coming. And so Paul is praying that God would open a way for him to come back to them so that he can help strengthen their faith by teaching them basic Christian truth.
 - Again we see Paul’s heart for people. All he cares about is serving others. He is not doing this for his own ego or to make himself feel good. No, he sees an area in their Christian lives that is lacking, he knows he can help, and so he desperately wants to serve them.

- So although prayer is normally to be to our Father in heaven, as Jesus taught us, it is also perfectly right and good when we pray directly to Jesus.
 - Alright that is the end of the third point. Sorry about the aside but it was too good to pass up and in my view very instructional on how we pray. The third point again was, growing in our prayers for other people means asking that we might play a part in strengthening their faith.

ASKING THAT OTHERS OVERFLOW WITH LOVE

- Finally now, to grow in our prayers for other people we must ask that their lives would overflow with love.
 - Look again at verse 12. **READ 12** – *“May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.”*
 - How can you pray for your church? How can you pray for other Christians? This is one of the greatest ways. Paul is greatly concerned that they would grow in love. Love for each other. This of course echoes many other verses throughout the New Testament.
- In John 13 Jesus says this is to be the mark of the Christian community. *“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”* Throughout history Christians have displayed many different symbols to show that they are Christians. Some people wear crosses around their necks. Still others tattoo pictures or Bible verses on their bodies. One of the more popular marks is the fish symbol on a person’s car.
 - Generally speaking all of these things from necklaces to tattoos to fish are meant to mark a person as a Christian. But here in John 13 Jesus makes clear that, however you may want to mark yourself as a Christian, there is to be one mark that supersedes all others. There is to be one defining mark that identifies Christians in all places at all times. Love.
- The New Testament is filled with this. The book of I John, for instance, is one continual reminder to Christians of their responsibility to love one another.
 - I John 3:11, *“This is the message you heard from the beginning: [that is from Jesus here in Jn 13] we should love one another”.*
 - It is like John is saying, *“Do not forget it. Never forget it. We must love one another. This is to be our defining mark.”*
- One of the church fathers, a man named Jerome, says that when John was in his old age at the church in Ephesus, he used to be carried in on a chair.
 - As he passed through the congregation, he would say to the congregation, *“Love one another. Love one another.”* And when they would ask him why he said this, he would say, *“Because it’s the Lord’s commandment and if you do this, it is everything.”*
- But Paul is also praying that our love would overflow not just to Christians but notice the phrase, *“and for everyone else.”*

- Gal 6:9-10 puts it well: ***“Let us not become weary in doing good...therefore as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people [regardless if they are believers are not but] especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”***
 - He is praying this so that as he says in verse 13, ***“May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.”***
- Friends, there is nothing difficult to understand here. Last week’s message was heavy on content. It was a typically Pauline type passage where we were digging deep into many different truths of the faith. We talked about calling, future hope, knowing God, and thankfulness. That was a lot of content and many different subjects. It was mind stretching. But this week, you notice there is really nothing complicated about this. But this is as practical as it gets.
 - Do we love one another? Are we actually living this out? Do we pray for each other that love would overflow to each other? Do we pray for each other that our love would overflow to believers and to unbelievers? And then again look at the last phrase in verse 12. **READ 12** - ***“May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.”*** Are you seeing Paul’s passion for people? It is everywhere. Do we have that passion?
 - C.S. Lewis wrote, ***“Do not waste your time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbor act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less.”***
- The 3rd century writer Tertullian declared that the one thing that converted him to Christianity was not the arguments they gave him, because he could find a counterpoint for every argument they would present. ***“But they demonstrated something I didn’t have. The thing that converted me to Christianity was the way they loved each other.”***¹
 - Tertullian later writes about how the Roman world spoke of Christians. ***“It is our care for the helpless, our practice of lovingkindness, that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. ‘Look’, they say, ‘How these Christians love one another! Look how they are prepared to die for one another.’”***²
- Brothers and sisters, we need to thank God for the love that we do enjoy. I am so grateful for the tangible acts and verbal expressions of love that I see going on in this church. But just as the Thessalonians were a healthy church that still needed to grow in this, so also we need to keep praying this for each other.
 - This week let’s grow in our prayers for others.

¹ Jones, G. C. (1986). *1000 illustrations for preaching and teaching* (220). Nashville, TN: Broadman Press.

² Ibid.