

Praying for Faith, Love, and Hope

By David Harrell

Bible Text: 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13
Preached on: Sunday, February 14, 2016

We return once again this morning to Paul's epistle to the Thessalonians. We are in 1 Thessalonians 3. We will be looking closely at verses 11 through 13. We have a passage before us that is very instructive to the issue of prayer as well as those things that should be a priority in our spiritual lives. Before we look at it closely, I'd like to help you gather your thoughts a bit with respect to the issue of prayer, thinking even of your own prayer life. There is perhaps no greater measure of a man's passion for the glory of God than his desire to commune with him in prayer. A man's religion may be public but his true love for Christ can only be measured in private. I have learned over the years that who I am on my knees is far more important than who I am on my feet. I have learned that solitude on my front porch is more important than my pulpit. I have learned that my secret communion with God is something that I treasure far more than my public association with men. Beloved, who we are in private communion before the Lord our God is the measure of who we really are as Christians. I confess that my prayer life is not what I wish it would be and I'm praying that he will help me to this end and you as well, especially in light of the Apostle Paul's example before us.

With respect to what we are about to examine here in verses 11 through 13, this is not intended to be a comprehensive prayer like the six categories that Jesus gives us in Matthew 6 in that model of prayer commonly called the Lord's Prayer, but rather the primary reason Paul penned this prayer was to underscore his passionate desire to return to them and shepherd them towards spiritual maturity given the prospect of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ which is the central theme of the epistle. He also intended for it to encourage and exhort them to excel still more in faith, hope, and love. But thirdly, when we combine these first two factors, we can also see that this prayer is didactic. In other words, it teaches us. It is a model for our prayers and so here we have another window where we can peer into the very soul of the apostle under the inspiration of the Spirit and see his priorities in prayer and therefore his passion in life.

Now, as we look at this, we will see that this is also a wish, not just a prayer, where Paul is not only able to express to the Thessalonians his sincere desire for their spiritual well-being, but also to express those same desires to God the Father and our Lord Jesus that they might act upon his request. Now, given all of that introduction, let's read what he has to say. Verse 11, 1 Thessalonians 3,

11 Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you; 12 and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you; 13 so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.

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To be sure, our prayers reflect our theology and they reveal the level of zeal that we have for the glory of God. Those who pray little, care little. Those who pray much, care much for the glory of God. Many people have a very undisciplined, lazy prayer life. Prayer is typically squeezed into a busy schedule as if it were some unwelcome intrusion. Of course, this betrays a heart that does not value an intimate relationship with God and does not really believe that he hears and supernaturally acts upon our requests, therefore such a person will remain spiritually immature, undiscerning, lacking in faith, hope, and love, and power to serve and so forth. Other Christians tend to have a very mechanical, almost liturgical prayer life where they string together worn-out clichés and slogans and phrases they've heard from others which really is very foreign to normal personal interaction and, of course, this betrays a heart that perceives God to be impersonal, maybe even magical, malleable, kind of like a genie in a bottle that requires some abracadabras in order to get him to do what we want.

I remember when I was a boy in our Wednesday night prayer meetings at Bethany Baptist Church in Moline, Illinois, I would sit with some of the boys until my father broke it up, and we would keep score between certain men that would pray to see how many times one man would say "Father God" in his prayer, another man, "Dear Father," and another one, "O Lord." They could squeeze those phrases into a four word sentence 14 times. Well, the point is even naughty little boys understand that nobody talks that way in normal conversation with their earthly father or their heavenly Father but it's easy for us to kind of fall into mechanical praying.

Then, of course, some have no prayer life at all and that certainly betrays a man or a woman who has never been born again, who does not know the joy of being in relationship with the lover of their soul. What person has no desire to fellowship with someone they claim to love and serve?

So I wish to examine Paul's prayer under two simple headings that I hope will be helpful for you. First, we will look at his attitude in prayer and there we will see that it was one of genuine gratitude, complete confidence, and passionate persistence. Then secondly, we will look at his petitions in prayer: he prayed for a growing faith, increasing love and a purifying hope. We want to ask ourselves do these attitudes really characterize our heart. Moreover, are these the kinds of priorities that characterize our prayers. I just pray that we will all measure ourselves against this standard and use this as a gentle reminder of what is truly pleasing to God because, folks, this is the key to really unlocking the door to having real intimacy with God where we can experience the soul thrilling joy of his presence in our life and experience his power unleashed in our service to him. And of course, this is what brings us to new heights of praise and new depths of worship, and

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what a joy it is to be around praying people, isn't it? Those people that you know are real prayer warriors. I love to spend time around them. We've got a lot of them in this church. In fact, some of you know that I know that of you because you're on my list; when I really need prayer, I give you a call.

And I want you to first notice to whom he prayed in verse 11. He says, "Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord," that's how he begins. Bear in mind that this is another example of Jesus' testimony, for example, in John 10:30 where he said, "I and the Father are one." The Father and Son are in perfect unity in their nature and in their action. In fact, in that little verse, the neuter form of the word "one" rules out the meaning that they are one and the same person. They are two separate people.

Now, here in verse 11, won't you notice, he says, "Now may our God and Father Himself," "Himself" in the original language is singular. "Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord," it is singular and it's in the emphatic position in the Greek word order. It could be translated, "Now may Himself, now may Himself our God and Father and Jesus Christ our Lord." Do you catch that? Now may Himself our God and Father and Jesus Christ our Lord direct our way to you. So this underscores the unity of the Father and the Son in the Godhead and it's for this reason that Paul here and in other places addresses Jesus equally with the Father. Both are God, very God. The two never work at cross purposes with one another and I might add as a footnote, in numerous other passages we learn that the Holy Spirit is also part of the divine Triune Godhead. He's a divine person. He possesses all of the attributes and personality of deity. He is co-equal. He is consubstantial, meaning he is of the same essence, the same nature with the Father and the Son. He is the one who, for example in Romans 8:27, searches the hearts and knows what the mind of the Spirit is because he intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. So we know that even the Holy Spirit is part of our prayers and we can address him as well. So we have the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Now, we want to begin by looking at Paul's attitude in prayer. What is his attitude, and here we find three spiritual virtues emerge. First of all, he prays with genuine gratitude. I want you to understand that despite his very difficult personal circumstances, his heart was overflowing with joy. Notice what he has said earlier that leads up to this prayer. Chapter 1, verse 2, "We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." Notice verse 6, he's excited because, "You became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit." Notice at the end of verse 9, he is overflowing with gratitude because they "turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven." And in verse 19 of chapter 2, he says, "For who is our

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hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? For you are our glory and joy."

So, folks, Paul's heart was overjoyed with the same thing that overjoys, shall we say, the heart of God, and what is that? God is thrilled with transformed sinners living to the praise of his glory. Now, we must ask ourselves: is this what thrills our heart? Is this at a foundational level in our prayer life? If so, this will be the great priority and purpose of our life. Everything else will be secondary to that. We know that this is what gets God's attention. You remember what God said through his prophet Isaiah in chapter 66, verse 2, he says, "But to this one I will look." In other words, "Let me tell you the type of person that gets my attention." He says, "To him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word." So Paul was ecstatic with what God was up to in the lives of others. He was elated also to know that he was a part of God's saving work, a work that will one day explode into eternal glory and triumph.

Dear Christian, you will never be a praying Christian if you have no passion to see sinners come to a saving knowledge of Christ and grow in Christ and live to the praise of his glory. That must be foundational to who you are because we must bear in mind that God does not exist for us, we exist for him. God is not orbiting around us as some center of gravity, we are to orbit around him. To say it a little bit differently, if you are not deeply grateful for what God has done and is doing and will do in your life and in the lives of others, your spiritual priorities are really out of whack and you will have no real desire to spend time before the living God at the throne of grace. You know, pride is a terrible thing, isn't it? It's so wretched and it's so powerful that we typically can't see it in our own life but it causes us to become self-willed and self-absorbed as if everything orbits around us. We become demanding and controlling even of God, and then when things don't go right, as I say, all we can see is the black spot on the white wall, and therefore we lose track of the reality of God's magnificent work of grace in our lives and all that he is doing and all that he has promised to bring glory ultimately to himself. And I want to keep emphasizing that because we must understand that the fuel of prayer is really our zeal for the glory of God that must be manifested in our Christlike character and conduct, especially our desire for the salvation of men and the sanctification of men so that they can live to the praise of his glory, and if this is missing, there is just not going to be any fire in the furnace of your prayer life.

Think about the context here. After being alone in Athens, he travels on to Corinth where he is alone, where he eventually wrote this letter. He's a man that's living in poverty basically, every now and then trying to eke out a living by making a tent which was a very, very difficult thing to do. Moreover, we know that he is struggling with sickness. He's struggling with all of the ways that his body has been just bruised and beaten as he

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suffers for Christ, and he's desperate to be able to go back to Thessalonica and shepherd those baby Christians who have been, shall we say, left alone in hostile enemy territory. But what is the theme of his heart? Is he sour? Is he sullen? No, he's filled with gratitude to God for all that God is doing. He is celebrating God's grace. Notice verse 9 of chapter 3, "For what thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account." And of course, the answer is there is nothing we can do to repay such a debt for all the joy that you give us, nothing but just rejoice, he says, before our God on your account.

Let me give you another example of this kind of attitude in the apostle. You will recall when he was in Corinth that despite enormous persecution and physical suffering, in 1 Corinthians 1, beginning in verse 4, he says, "I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus." I mean, this is a guy that's just constantly thankful. If you were around him, you'd almost get tired of it. I mean, the guy is just always happy and thankful. You know, his back is bleeding and he's sick and all these terrible things going on and he's just filled with gratitude. "I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge, even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ." Folks, this is what thrilled his soul, to see what God was doing in other people, and this is what fueled his prayer life. He was overflowing with gratitude.

Now, I would humbly submit to you as your pastor that if you have really no desire to spend time before the Lord in prayer, this may be part of the problem, that you really aren't that thankful for all that God is doing in you and others. You know, discontent, whiny, complaining, sour Christians focus on themselves and they tend to live for themselves. If I can put it real practically and I hope this doesn't come across as sacrilegious because that's not my intent, but Eeyore never prayed, did he? I never saw him pray. I think you get the point. Eeyore Christians don't pray, all they do is whine. I remember confronting some of my precious grandchildren on this very thing. I remember sitting them down on the couch after they had done something naughty and I was trying to shepherd their hearts and I told them that, "You kids need to remember the word cap, c-a-p because it describes your character and conduct. You complain, then you argue, and then you pout, and you're wearing that hat way too much around here." Of course, as I'm telling them that, I realize I wear it that cap as well and so do you, but when you're wearing that cap you're not going to be a praying Christian.

Well, not only was his heart filled with gratitude, genuine gratitude, secondly, we see that he prays with complete confidence. You see, he believed with all of his heart that God

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hears prayer and answers prayer; that it really makes a difference. In verse 10, he is praying night and day most earnestly that we may see your face, complete what is lacking in your faith. In verse 11 he's praying that God will direct him to them. Verse 12, praying that the Lord would cause them to increase and abound in love. Verse 13, that he would establish their hearts unblameable in holiness at the coming of our Lord Jesus, and we'll explain that in a moment. But Paul really believes that God hears prayers and answers prayers according to his eternal purposes. Well, of course he does believe that. Did he not encounter the glorious Shekinah of the presence of God at his conversion on the road to Damascus where God spoke to him? Did not Jesus himself in some mystery that's not fully explained, take him into the wilderness of Arabia for three years and personally teach him? Of course he did so he knew the truth about prayer that God supernaturally hears and he supernaturally acts accordingly.

Now, it's not that we in any way manipulate God but rather our prayers demonstrate our complete confidence in him and God uses our prayers to accomplish his purposes. This is why he commands us to pray. Let me put this a little more practical because I hear this from time to time, "Yes, but God is sovereign and ultimately in control of all things to accomplish his purposes. Moreover, he's omniscient, he's not lacking for any information here. He knows what's going on in our heart. Nothing surprises him so help me understand why do we need to pray? What difference is that going to make?" Well, the answer is because he uses our prayers as a means to accomplish his purposes. Now, I can't explain how all that works but I know that biblically. He helps us see this. You see, he not only ordains the ends he purposes to accomplish, he also ordains the means to those ends and prayer is a part of that.

Let me give you an example. You remember through the prophet Jeremiah God addressed his covenant people Israel, Jeremiah 29, making it clear that he had a sovereign plan that cannot be thwarted. In verse 11 Jeremiah recorded God's word in this regard, he said, "For I know the plans that I have for you, plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope." By the way, many times people use that with respect to America. It has nothing to do with America. It's speaking about the theocracy of Israel and God's covenantal plans for them etc. But what did God say that they would do in the very next verse? Verse 12, he says, "you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you." In other words, "Here's how I'm going to accomplish my plans for you. You're going to call upon me and come and pray to me and I will listen to you." In other words, "I have ordained both the ends of all I have purposed to accomplish and I have also ordained the means to those ends including your humble prayers." It's an amazing thing.

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Let me give you another example. Nehemiah prays in Nehemiah 1 and before that we see that he learns of the captivity of his people and he learns how Jerusalem is in absolute ruins. The text says in Nehemiah 1 that he "sat down and wept and mourned for days," then it says he "was fasting and praying before the God of heaven." Even though he understood and accepted God's sovereign control that he expressed in verse 5 when he described God as the "LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments." So he knew that God was in control of all these things, nevertheless what did he do? He begged God to be merciful to the plight of his people and he said in verse 6, "let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants." Oh, child of God, don't miss this. Even as God uses evangelism to accomplish his eternal purposes in saving his elect, so too he uses prayer as his ordained means to accomplish his sovereign will. In other words, he commands us to pray because our prayers are used by him to do what he has planned.

It also demonstrates our confidence in his steadfast love and his infinite power to act on our behalf for his glory. Jesus said therefore in John 14:13, "Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do." Why? Why? Why? Why? Why is that? He says, "that the Father may be glorified in the Son." That's the ultimate end of it all. "If you ask anything in my name, I will do it." Paul says in Philippians 4:6, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Beloved, do you really believe that prayer makes a difference? Do you really believe that God hears and answers accordingly? If so, then why do you pray so little? In James 5:16 we are told that, "The effective prayer of a righteous man accomplishes much." Do you believe that? The writer of Hebrews says in Hebrews 11:6, "he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him."

Well, certainly Paul believed it and he prayed with complete confidence and, thirdly, we see that he prays with passionate persistence. Verse 10, "we night and day keep praying most earnestly." It doesn't mean that they literally prayed all day and all night; it's an idiomatic expression for a long period of time. In other words, Paul is saying that "I have been decisively committed to sustained periods of prayer in these regards." And ultimately we're going to see it's for your faith, hope, and love. You see, he didn't just flippantly kind of pray in passing with his mind drifting off in all different directions as sometimes it happens. And this isn't merely, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep," type of thing. No, it is a well thought out plea to the living God. It is a scheduled event, not an unwelcome interruption to his busy life that he has to do as some kind of religious obligation. No, he set aside extended periods of time to pray.

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Now, we want to be careful. We don't want to be legalistic here. You might say, "Well, how much are we supposed to pray? How often?" Well, there's no prescribed amount in Scripture. I mean, frankly, the more pressing the need, the more urgent the prayer. I think we would all agree with that. I think of Jacob in Exodus 32, remember he wrestled with God all night. Remember David in Psalm 119:64, he said, "Seven times a day I praise You because of Your righteous ordinances." Daniel 6:10, we know that it was Daniel's habit to fall on his knees three times a day praying and giving thanks before his God. In Luke 6:12, we learn that Jesus spent all night praying for discernment regarding who he would choose as his disciples. And Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 that we should pray without ceasing. In other words, we are to pray persistently and regularly. And this is crucial for anybody in Christian ministry, especially pastors. I think of Acts 6 where the disciples selected among them certain people to be deacons to serve the people. Why? Verse 4, so that we can "devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." Spurgeon said, "I take it that as a minister he is always praying. He is not always in the act of prayer but he lives in the spirit of it. If you are a genuine minister of God, you will stand as a priest before the Lord, spiritually wearing the ephod and the breastplate whereon you bear the names of your children, pleading for them within the veil." A reference to what the priests used to do. Paul said in Colossians 4:2, "Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving."

We're not too good at devoting ourselves to prayer, are we? Moreover, we're not too good at keeping alert. We pray a little bit and all of a sudden you're thinking about something else and then you come back. By the way, that's why it's really important to pray with a pen and a pencil and an open Bible, have things written down. Keep your mind on track. And by the way, when you're passionate about something, you don't get distracted. When you find out that your wife has just been in a car accident and you don't know how she is, as I once was, believe me, on my way up to Exit 11, my mind was not distracted when I prayed for her. Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving. And again, Matthew 7:7 Jesus commands us, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." By the way, those are all active present participles meaning what he's saying is, "Keep on asking. Keep on seeking. Keep on knocking. Don't stop." Beloved, you must understand that you will never be able to walk with Christ in a manner worthy of your calling without living in the presence of the living God. It's just simply not going to happen. And we must also realize that God is honored by our passionate and persistent prayers. I think of my little granddaughter right now. I know what persistence means. When she wants something, she will get right in front of me and pitch a fit until she finally gets Papa's attention. At some level, this is what the Lord wants from us.

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Let me give you an example. In Luke 11, the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray and he gives them that model of prayer and then he followed that with a parable. Verse 5, he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and goes to him at midnight and says to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves.'" Now, mind you, the whole family is asleep, alright, that's the idea. "For a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him." That's kind of like, "Are you kidding me? You're waking me up in the middle of the night for some bread for a friend to eat?" Verse 7, "and from inside he answers and says, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.'" Jesus says, "I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs." In other words, to get the guy to quit beating on the door, let me give you some bread. "So I say to you, ask, and it will be given." Again as I said earlier, keep asking. "Keep seeking and you will find. Keep knocking and it will be open to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it will be opened."

Now, Jesus says, "suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he?" The idea is, of course not. "Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?" Beloved, God wants us to pound on the gates of heaven with earnestness and with boldness and with urgency to the very one who alone can sympathize with our weaknesses; one who has been tempted in all things, even as we are, yet without sin. Therefore the writer of Hebrews says, "Let us therefore draw near with, what? "Confidence. Draw near with confidence to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Let me give you another example. Jesus made the same point in the parable of the persistent widow. Remember that in Luke 18, beginning in verse 1, "Now He was telling them a parable," why? "To show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart," the idea of persistence here. He said this, "In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man. There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, 'Give me legal protection from my opponent.' For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, 'Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.'" Alright, we all see the picture here. "And the Lord said, 'Hear what the unrighteous judge said; now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly.'"

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So, folks, not only does God respond to passionate and persistent prayer, he desires it. I am constantly pounding on the gates of heaven for the salvation of my children and my grandchildren and for you and I'm sure many of you are doing the same thing. Isaiah 62:6 the prophet says, "Never be silent. Give God no rest." The idea is plead with him, show him your absolute dependency on him, your confidence in him and your willingness to accept his answer knowing that he always acts righteously and justly and he ultimately acts for our good and his glory.

Well, this is how Paul prayed, but what did he pray for? Here we look, secondly, at his petitions in prayer. He prayed, first of all, for growing faith, 1. Notice in verse 11, "Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you." "Direct" has the idea in the original language of "removing obstacles." Remember, Satan was trying to hinder him in many ways. Well, why did he want to get to them? Well, remember back in verses 2 and 3 and so forth, the reason he sent Timothy in his place, why? "To strengthen and encourage you as to your faith, so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions." Verse 5, "when I could endure it no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you." And then Timothy, you will recall, returns with a great report and in verse 7, "we were comforted about you through your faith." And in verse 10 he prays night and day "most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith."

Beloved, please understand: Paul never prayed for his health and for his wealth nor did he ever beg his people to give him more money for his ministry. He was not concerned with material things that would bless him, he was captivated with spiritual things that would give glory to God and he prayed specifically here for their faith to grow by clearing the way so that he could go and shepherd them face-to-face. Every church needs a shepherd and he prayed for ministry opportunities, laying up treasures in heaven, not on earth. You know, he did the same thing in Colossians 4, remember in verse 3 he asked the saints there to pray "that God will open up to us a door for the word so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ for which I have also been imprisoned that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak."

Now, think about this: very often when we ask for prayer request what's the dominant request? You've got it, it's about physical things and that's important. I mean, when people are sick, I mean, that's very important. I'm not trying to mitigate that in any way, but sadly very seldom do we hear people praying for faith to grow in other people and for you to be a part of that; to pray for the spiritual growth of our family. This is what Paul did and, by the way, that spiritual growth is always a direct result of the Spirit's sanctifying work in a believer through the ministry of his word. Jesus said when he prayed to the Father, "Father, sanctify them in the truth. Thy word is truth." I mean, we

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know this, even as a little baby will not grow into healthy maturity apart from proper physical nourishment and exercise, so too we as believers will never grow into Christlike maturity apart from the proper spiritual nourishment of the word and the exercising of our faith. This is why Peter said that we need to be like "newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word so that by it to you may grow in respect to salvation." As a footnote, this is why it is absolutely crucial that you subject yourself to the systematic, in-depth preaching and teaching and application and, frankly, shepherding of the word of God otherwise you won't grow. If I can put it a little bit differently, believers who are not taught well and shepherded well will not live well. I see this all the time. They are spiritually weak. They are undiscerning. They are frustrated. They are ineffective in service. They believe all kinds of weird things. Their marriage and their families are a disaster. I have seen generational train wrecks because people don't know anything about the word. They think they do but they don't and they've never really been shepherded and so forth.

So Paul is passionate about this. He wants them to be able to say with him in their prayer life, "Father, my heart is overflowing with gratitude for what you've done in me and what you're doing in other people because the result of all that is your glory. So now with passionate persistence and with great confidence, I am praying that you will hear my cry. Use me for your glory. Sanctify these people. Increase their faith because I know that you are able to do exceeding, abundantly beyond all that I ask or think according to the power that works within me. To him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen," Ephesians 3:20. By the way, as a footnote, it's really fascinating God answered that prayer. It's really interesting, in his second letter to them in 2 Thessalonians 1:3 he begins by saying, "We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is only fitting," here's why, "because your faith is greatly enlarged." God answered that very prayer.

So he prayed for growing faith, secondly, he prayed for increasing love. Notice verse 12, he says, "and may the Lord," and this is a direct reference here to Jesus our Lord as we see in verse 11, "may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all men, just as we also do for you." You see, he understood that this crucial spiritual virtue would not increase and abound, as he says, apart from a supernatural work of the Master in their heart. That's why he says, "may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love." This agape love; this most noble form of love; this love of choice, not a love of emotion that comes and goes. You see, he knew that that congregation had a very interesting mix as really most all of the New Testament congregations did. They had Gentiles and Jews that had come to saving faith in Christ bringing all of their cultural and religious baggage into the church, and so it would be real easy for this kind of love to degenerate into jealousy and strife and animosity. That happened, for example, to the

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Praying for Faith, Love, and Hope

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Galatians. Paul was frustrated with them and he said of them that, "My goodness, you're biting and devouring one another like wild animals." I've seen some of that even in this church. It's kind of like road rage comes off of the interstate and comes into the church, most of the time over the most ridiculous thing. This is why it's so important that we pray for this kind of love with one another because it's so easy for us to all of a sudden get off track and before you know it because somebody cut us off, we want to run them off the road and kill them spiritually speaking.

Moreover, he knew how hard it would be for them to really love the lost, some of those people that were persecuting them. Jesus exhorted his disciples saying, "Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you." But I find it interesting here, he's not praying just that their love will increase but notice that it will abound. It's interesting in the original language it means to overflow in superabundance. He wants that love to not just increase but to just explode beyond the limits of anyone's imagination. That's the point. And he gives an example of this kind of love when he speaks of the love that they experienced from him and Silas, he says, "just as we also do for you."

Dear friends, is this a priority in your prayer life, increasing and abounding love on your behalf and on the behalf of others? If not, it's because it's probably not a priority in your heart. You know, you can look around this worship center and I'm sure you can find a few people that you don't like very much, much less love. Now, I know sometimes there's a difference. I will admit that some of you I love more than I probably like. Some of you I would enjoy on a camping trip more than others, and likewise you with me, but dear friends, when that degenerates into bitterness and resentment, jealousy and strife, oh, that is a wickedness that will absolutely rob you of blessing and bring great division and dishonor to a church so we have to pray for that, and the more we grasp Christ's love for us, the more we will love others. John MacArthur summarized this so well when he said of Paul, quote, "He loved them when they were strangers in the greatest spiritual need by sacrificially bringing the Gospel to them. Then after they received justification, he loved them by the living sacrifice of his life for their sanctification." So in their justification and sanctification, Paul demonstrated his love. He came to those people that wanted nothing to do with the Gospel, both Jews and Gentiles, and yet when he delivered the Gospel by the power of the Spirit, their hearts were softened and many believed.

Well, Paul understood that while having a growing faith and an increasing love was foundational to their Christian life and to their ministry, he also knew that it wasn't enough. There was something else that he needed to pray for and that was, 3: purifying hope. Again, in verse 12 he prays that the Lord would cause them to increase and abound in love one another, and for all men, "so that," verse 13, "He may establish your hearts." It literally means "make you feel secure." "Unblameable," he says, "in holiness before,"

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or literally, "in the presence of our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all the saints." Now, the grammar implies that establishing the believers as those who are blameless in holiness is really the fruit of their mutual love toward one another and for everyone else. In fact, the first part of the verse could be translated, "so that your hearts might be established blameless in holiness." You see, the increasing nature of their love for each other and for all people contributed to their holiness, shall we say. He wanted them to be mindful of the fact that one day they were going to stand before Christ at the judgment seat of Christ, 2 Corinthians 5:10, and their works are going to be evaluated and the Lord will then reward them accordingly for their service, and he knew that this would be a great motivation for holy living, as it should be.

Now, bear in mind, he's not suggesting here that we earn our salvation. No, no, no, we are justified by faith and faith alone; we have peace with God, Romans 5, through our Lord Jesus Christ; and we stand in grace, Paul tells us, and Christ is able to keep us from stumbling, Jude 24, make a stand in the presence of his glory, blameless with great joy. But while it is true that sanctification is all a work of God, we are also responsible to be obedient and God uses our obedience to bring about that sanctifying work and it's this kind of purity of life that Paul is praying for. Notice, he wants them to look forward to the coming, literally the parousia, the presence of our Lord Jesus with all his saints, referring to Christ's return to rapture his bridal church, something that he will discuss later in chapter 4, verse 13 through 18. And he also wants them to look forward to their reward at the judgment seat of Christ, and he speaks about this in other passages, certainly we read about it in Revelation 22:12 where, again, believers are going to be rewarded for their faithfulness and obedience and that's going to be determined by the motivation that we had in our service for Christ, 1 Corinthians 4:5.

So Paul passionately prays that this hope would purify them. John speaks of this in 1 John 3:3, he says, "And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure." Peter shared the same passion when he said, "Therefore, prepare your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ." Here's how, "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.' If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay on earth; knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ."

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Well, friends, here we see three petitions that underscore the specific priorities of Paul's life and certainly his prayers. He is concerned that they grow spiritually in three areas: faith, love, and hope. By the way, that's the great triad of supreme Christian virtues. He spoke of this in other passages. 1 Corinthians 13:3, "and now abides faith, hope, and love." And in closing, may I remind you that at the beginning of this epistle in verse 3, of chapter 1, he says, "I remember your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope." Then it's interesting in chapter 5, verse 8, at the end, he says, "you need to put on the breastplate of faith and love and as a helmet the hope of salvation." So in the beginning of the epistle and at the end of the epistle and now here in the middle of the epistle he focuses on these three great spiritual virtues. Now, what does that tell us? This is very important in our spiritual life as well. These things should always be a part of our prayer life, that we are growing in our faith, we are increasing and abounding in our love, and we are living in a way where our lives are pure before the Lord, knowing of the hope that we have of one day standing in his presence. So I encourage each of you to evaluate your life accordingly, especially your prayer life in light of these great truths, and I'm sure the next time I ask for prayer requests, I'm going to hear a few of these things mentioned. Amen. Absolutely.

Let's pray together.

Father, thank you for these eternal truths. I pray that you will cause them to bear much, much fruit, not only that we might experience more the joys that are ours being united to you through faith in Christ, but ultimately, Lord God, that you would be glorified. That is the desire of our heart. We long to see you face-to-face. Even so, Lord Jesus, come quickly for it is in your name that I pray. Amen.

We pray you have been edified by this presentation. You have been listening to Pastor, Bible Teacher and Author, Dr. David Harrell. For more information or for other messages from Dr. Harrell, please visit the Olive Tree Christian Resources website at otcr.org.

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