



A PARENT'S LOVE

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1 Thess 2:17-3:13

Fourth Message

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We all have models, people whom we look up to in Christian ministry. One man I greatly respect is Bruce Wilkinson, the founder of Walk Through the Bible Ministries. A few years ago I heard Bruce share an experience that had touched him. After he graduated from seminary, he took a teaching position in Multnomah School of the Bible, and one of the courses he taught was a freshman class on Bible study. On registration day, he learned there were eight sections of freshmen, and he was given sections one, two and three. Another professor pointed out to Bruce that section two was an honors class. Every year, he said, the top students were placed in that group. This section was usually reserved for professors who had tenure, and he expressed surprised that Bruce had got it.

When section two met for the first time, Bruce said he wondered what it would be like to teach an honors class. As the young people entered the classroom, he noticed nothing special or different about them; they were normal eighteen and nineteen year olds. But when he began to teach, he said the atmosphere was electric. The students were bright, their questions filled with insight. This continued week after week. Once, when the academic dean asked him what he enjoyed most about teaching, the answer was easy. "Section two. The honors class," said Bruce. The dean looked puzzled. Then he said, "We don't have an honors class anymore. We stopped doing that two years ago. We found that it's better to disperse the honors students among all the classes." Bruce's palms began to sweat. He excused himself and went to the registrar and asked for the list of section two honors students. "We don't have an honors class," he was told. "All the sections are the same."

Bruce became really concerned now. He went to check his grade book, because grades are always the test, he reminded himself. He discovered that the section two grades were far better than those of sections one and three. He put the blue books of a recent test from section two on his desk, and beside them he put the blue books of section one. There was a big difference between them. Then he put the section three blue books on top of the section one books and pressed them down. Section two was higher than the combined sections one and three!

Bruce said he learned a profound lesson that day about the power of expectations and the power of unconditional love. The only difference between section two and sections one and three was his unvoiced expect-

tations for what would happen in class. "If my unvoiced expectations could have such a powerful effect," he said, "what effect could my voiced expectations have as I learn to speak lovingly to students?"

A leader's expectations can have a profound influence on the growth of others. We have been learning this principle of the power of love in ministry in our opening studies in the apostle Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians.

Paul's critics had condemned him for his motives and conduct while he was in Thessalonica, for his quick departure from the city, and what they regarded as his irresponsible failure to return. He had either abandoned the Thessalonians, they charged, or he was too cowardly to go back. The apostle was driven to defend himself against this added defamation. If 2:1-16, the passage we looked at last week, was Paul's defense of his conduct when he was in Thessalonica, then 2:17 through 3:13, which we will study today, is his defense of his failure to return.

It is hard to imagine how anyone reading these verses could consider Paul to be stern and cold, as he is sometimes described. These verses overflow with the warmth of his heart and the depth of his love for the Thessalonians. He begins his defense in 2:17,

But we, brethren, having been bereft of you for a short while—in person, not in spirit—were all the more eager with great desire to see your face. (1 Thess 2:17, NASB)

Paul had left the Thessalonians reluctantly, not voluntarily. He had not run away. On the contrary, he had been "torn away" from them, as the New International Version renders it. The word was used of a parent who had been deprived of his children or a child who had been deprived of his parents. It was an unnatural and painful separation, one that Paul had not sought, but was done to him against his will. He hoped it would be temporary. In any event his absence was only physical. In his heart he never had left them.

Paul goes on to say that he made repeated efforts to return to them. Verse 18,

For we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, more than once—and yet Satan thwarted us. (2:18)

When Paul wrote this letter from Corinth, he was ministering on his own. Doubtless he was feeling lonely and distant from the people he loved so much. Forget-

ting the danger that had driven him from Thessalonica and the cruelty he experienced in the city, he longed to return there. But when he tried, Satan stopped him.

“Thwarted” is an interesting word. It means, “cut into.” It was used of the breaking up of a road to make it impassable; it was also used of a runner cutting in in the middle of a race. We do not know how this Satanic interference expressed itself. Most likely it was the legal ban which city officials had imposed on Jason, Paul’s host while the apostle was in Thessalonica. These people had taken security from Jason before releasing Paul, with the threat of severe penalties if he returned.

So it was Satan who hindered Paul. Satan, the great opposer, is the adversary who puts obstacles in the path of the people of God to attempt to prevent the will of God from being accomplished in and through them. Don’t be surprised if you experience repeated frustration when you try to do something you know to be right. If you want to live a significant life you will face opposition and even hatred. The only way to avoid reproach is to be nothing, do nothing, and say nothing. Charles Briggs has written:

If your ambition is to avoid the troubles of life, the recipe is simple: shed your ambitions in every direction, cut the wings of every soaring purpose, and seek a little life with the fewest contacts and relations ... Tiny souls can dodge through life; bigger souls are blocked on every side. As soon as men and women begin to enlarge their lives, their resistances are multiplied.

The Bible is the only book that explains the origin and persistence of evil in the world. Why do we struggle so much in life? What are we up against? Jesus said it is the devil. Satan is a liar and murderer. His goal is destruction and his method deception. Here is how Paul puts it in Ephesians, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” It is not people who are the problem; it is the spiritual forces of evil that prevail in the world.

How did Paul know to attribute this blockage to Satan, while attributing others to God? The answer is, both are true. Although Satan thwarts us, God retains supreme authority. Recall that Satan had to ask God’s permission to afflict Job. It is encouraging to know that all Satanic opposition is permitted by God and used by him for good in our lives. Opposition is an effective method for training. Affliction, suffering, pain and heartache are often God’s way to get our attention.

These attacks were all the more painful to Paul because his inability to return to Thessalonica was not due to any indifference on his part. In the next verses he unconsciously gives them evidence of his longing for them by asking a number of rhetorical questions which express his love for them. Verse 19:

For who is our 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. (2:19-20)

Paul is saying that his joy in this world and his glory in the next were all tied up with the Thessalonians. He considered the maturing of these believers in Thessalonica and other places his most important work. He is saying, “I have invested my life in you and your growth into mature, whole people. This is the most important thing in the world. When the Lord Jesus comes, I will be thrilled at the changes in your life that I so longed to see come about.”

Paul’s repeated efforts to return to Thessalonica were frustrated by the lack of news about the church there. The suspense grew until he could stand it no longer. Something had to be done to relieve the tension. Since he could not go, he decided to send Timothy in his place (3:1),

Therefore when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone; and we sent Timothy, our brother and God’s fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith, so that no man may be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this. For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know. For this reason, 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 our labor should be in vain. (3:1-5)

This was a very real sacrifice on the part of the apostle. When he arrived in Athens, he immediately sent for Timothy to join him. Then Timothy arrived and told Paul that he had no news concerning the Thessalonians, and Paul immediately sent him to Thessalonica to make inquiries. Although that meant that Paul would be left alone again for the second time, he was willing to bear that loneliness if only he could get news through Timothy about the Thessalonians.

Twice Paul says that he could not stand the suspense any longer: “when we could endure it no longer” (3:1); “when I could endure it no longer” (3:5). The fact that there was no news from the Thessalonians was an intolerable suspense for Paul, so he sent Timothy to find out how they were, and to strengthen, encourage and cheer them up. He was concerned that their sufferings might lead them astray from Christ. Timothy would remind them that tribulation was a necessary part of their Christian calling. “When we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction,” says Paul. The inevitability of suffering was a regular part of Paul’s instruction to new converts.

When people tell me that life is hard, I reply, “Of course it is.” I find that answer is more satisfying than anything else I can say. Life is indeed difficult and de-

manding. The path which God takes us on at times seems to lead away from our good, causing us to think we have missed a turn and taken the wrong road. But that is because somewhere along the line we have been taught to believe that if we're on the right track, God's goodness will always translate into earthly good: that he will heal us, deliver us, exempt us from disease and pain; that we will have money in the bank, children who turn out well, and a comfortable life; that nobody will lose a business, fail in marriage, or live in poverty. Paul sent Timothy to correct this fantasy.

Remember Isaiah's words that it was the "Lord's will to crush his servant and cause him to suffer" (Isaiah 53:10). Jesus' bruising, and ours, are part of God's will. Our Lord was nailed to the cross; we can count on being nailed to the wall. It is helpful to see our struggles in that light—as being crucified with Christ. Our hearts want to cry out, "Come down from the cross and save yourself," but at that point we must remember Jesus' words, "Not my will but Thine be done."

God gives us over to such bruising because they are part of the process that make us into what he intends us to be. Suffering makes us sweeter and mellower. As we learn to let go of what we want, we lose the fear of losing out. We're not so easily provoked to wrath by harm or reproof. We learn to absorb abuse without retaliation; to accept reproof without defensiveness; to return a soft answer to cruel words. Hostility and accusation teach us to pray—to really pray—and this develops our relationship to God. It moves us closer to him and makes us more susceptible to his shaping. That is what Paul sent Timothy to tell the Thessalonians. They need not fear. They had a new source of strength. They could lean on God. He would take them through everything and use it for their benefit.

Paul could not wait to hear how they were doing. When Timothy brought back the good report, the apostle was beside himself with joy. Verse 6:

But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you; for this reason, brethren, in all our distress and affliction we were comforted about you through your faith; for now we {really} live, if you stand firm in the Lord. 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, as we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith? (3:6-10)

Timothy came back with good news, but Paul had already left Athens. He was in Corinth now, so Timothy joined him there. To Paul's great relief, Timothy reported that his work had not been in vain. It stood solid and sure. The Thessalonians' faith was intact, their love was evident, and, best of all, their trust in God was secure. Further, they held cherished memories of the apostle

and longed to see him.

This information so overwhelmed the apostle, he could not contain himself. So he cries, in verse 7: "Why should *your* faith encourage *us*, you ask? Because our life is bound up in yours! *For now we can really live.*" The Jerusalem Bible says, "Now we can breathe again." One scholar translates it, "Now we have been given a new lease on life." Paul was filled with thankfulness and joy at this good news. This is how a father responds when he hears a good report of his children's welfare.

Paul is moved to prayer on behalf of the Thessalonians. He says that he prayed earnestly and continuously. That was because prayer was the main thing, the core, the spirit of all that he did. And it is for us as well when we are pushed beyond our limits, frightened out of our wits, and pressed out of our comfort zones. On such occasions, prayer is a reflex action.

But what Paul knew, and what we must realize is, that we are *always* needy people. We are inadequate, deficient, and desperately dependent on God. Without him we can do nothing—and prayer is the highest expression of that dependence. Paul's life, like the life of Jesus, was marked by continuous prayer, triggered by continuous need. Morning and evening, whether he was working on his tents or walking the streets of the city, his prayers flowed out of a heart of concern and love. The Thessalonians were seldom out of his thoughts, and whenever he thought of them he prayed.

Then, having referred to his earnest and continuous prayers, Paul breaks into prayer (verse 11),

Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you; and 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; so that He may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints. (3:11-13)

The apostle prays for three precise and particular things. First, he prays that God might clear the way for him to return; that God would make straight or level the way that Satan had cut up; and that God would remove the obstacles that Satan had thrown down. That prayer was answered about five years later, toward the end of Paul's third missionary journey (Acts 20:1-3).

Secondly, he prays that their love might increase for each other and reach unbelievers as well. Love is the measure of Christian maturity. Love is the sign to the unbelieving world that God is present.

The restaurant where our Tuesday morning men's Bible study meets closed down last week. On Friday afternoon, the woman who has waited on our tables for the last couple of years telephoned me. She told me that serving us on Tuesday mornings meant more to her than her job. "I'm not going to miss my job at all," she said, "But I'm really going to miss you guys on Tuesdays. When you find a new place, is there any way a

woman can come to your study?" Becky saw our men's love for one another. As she served us, she felt the warmth and care of the men for her, and she responded. That is the power of love in ministry.

Pastors at times talk about what a successful ministry looks like. But oftentimes they measure success by the number of members of their church, the size or design of their building, or how many programs they are operating. In the New Testament, however, success is gauged by how much people learn to love one other, forgive one another, listen to one another, support and pray for one another, and reach out to those in need around them.

Finally, the apostle prays that the Lord would establish their hearts in holiness, that they might continue to live righteously until the Lord comes.

What is the basis of Paul's emotional attachment to the Thessalonians? Why all this exaggerated language? What is this loving and longing all about? "...for now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord." What does that mean? Why the unbearable suspense when there was no news, and overwhelming joy when the news was good? Why these fervent prayers, this concern and anxiety that indicate Paul's entire life was bound up with theirs? These are the questions I wrestled with as I studied this passage. The answer that kept coming to mind is that Paul's language is the language of parents. This is how parents feel when they are separated from their children. They are anxious about them when there is no news, and when the news is good, they are overwhelmed with joy. So, whether consciously or unconsciously, in this letter Paul is giving an example of what it means to be a true shepherd. Pastoral love is parental love; that is its quality.

As we look back on this section from chapters 2-3, which I have said has been such a wonderful model to me of effective ministry, we see that Paul has responded to his critics by defending his ministry while he was with them, and explaining his failure to return to Thessalonica. Describing his ministry, he uses the metaphors of a steward and a parent. Like a steward he was faithful to guard and dispense the gospel; like a mother and father he was gentle in caring for his converts and diligent in educating them. From these two metaphors we discern the two major responsibilities of pastoral ministry, two indispensable qualities demanded of everyone who is engaged in ministry:

First, there is *our commitment to the word of God*. It was Paul's firm assurance that his message came from God. He did not invent it. He was a steward entrusted with it to guard it and proclaim it, and he must above all else be faithful. This is where every Christian ministry begins, with the conviction that we have been called to handle God's word. It is that word, working powerfully

in those who believe, that changes lives. Our task is to study it, expound it, apply it, and obey it.

Secondly, there is *our commitment to the people of God*. Paul expressed his deep love for the Thessalonians by likening himself to their parents. He felt and acted towards them like they were his own children, which indeed they were, since he had introduced them to Christ. So he fed them and taught them. He earned his own living so he would not be a burden to them; he was concerned to see them grow into maturity; and he was gentle and sacrificial toward them.

In these verses, Paul lays open his heart of love for the Thessalonians. He had departed from them with great reluctance. In fact, he was torn away from them against his will. He tried to visit them, but all his attempts were thwarted. As he awaited news from them, he found the suspense unbearable, and so at great personal cost he sent Timothy to encourage them and find out how they were. When Timothy came back with the good news, he could hardly contain his joy. And all the time he was separated from them he had been pouring his heart out in prayer for them. Paul's life was inextricably bound up with his Thessalonian converts.

As Christians, our commitment in ministry is to these two things—truth and love. These are the two indispensable characteristics of all true ministry. Truth and love, especially in combination, edify the church.

But this is a rare combination in the church. Some leaders are powerful in championing the truth. They can smell heresy a mile away. Their nose begins to twitch, and the smell of battle gets them going. They roll up their sleeves, flex their muscles and they are in for a fight. While their commitment to the truth is commendable, I wish there was a little more love about them.

Others fail on the opposite side. They are tremendous advocates of love, but they are timid in their defense of the truth. "Come," they say, "let us love one another. It doesn't matter what you believe. Doctrine divides. Let us drown our doctrinal differences in an ocean of brotherly love."

Truth is hard to hear at times if it isn't softened by love. But love is soft if it isn't strengthened by truth. How can we develop a balance between the two? The answer is the Holy Spirit. Jesus called him the "Spirit of truth." It is he who illumines our minds and assures our hearts. Truth, and its understanding, come from him. But, the first fruit of the Spirit is love. So wherever the Spirit is and reigns, truth and love reign with him.

My prayer for us as a body of Christians is that we will learn the balance between truth and love, and put into practice, amongst ourselves and in our dealings with others, the lessons we have learned.

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