

Introduction

1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13

Love Letters. Sitting in the drawer of my nightstand is a tan envelope that is very special to me. I'm not the hoarding type, but it's one of the few possessions that I own that are on my "I would grab it if there was a fire" list.

In that envelope is just about every letter or note that my wife Lindsay has ever written to me, from all the way back when we first started dating over a decade ago to much more recently. Letters of encouragement, love, affection, and affirmation. I'm a big nostalgia person + care deeply about words of affirmation, especially from her – so this envelope means a lot to me.

In fact, occasionally if she's out of town or if I'm having a particularly rough day, I'll pull out a few of those notes or letters and read over them as an encouragement to my soul.

Does anyone else have these sorts of notes or letters?

- Maybe from a spouse, or a parent, or grandparent?
- An email that you have saved from a mentor or an old boss that was deeply encouraging and uplifting and meaningful
- Or what about that text message of encouragement from a close friend when you needed it the most that you still have the screenshot of on your phone?

As we continue our series through 1 and 2 Thessalonians as a church, I don't want us to forget that what we're looking at together over these 10 weeks aren't just theology texts to be studied or a bullet point list of commands or promises for our daily quiet time with God.

They are letters.

Letters inspired by the Holy Spirit, yes. The true and without error revelation of God for all time for His people, yes.

But also – letters. Written from a real person to real people in a real time and a real place with real relationships and history.

And that's going to factor in prominently in our passage of Scripture this morning. This is the most personal portion of the first letter, where Paul is going to explain in great detail what's been happening since he left Thessalonica about a year prior.

And what we're going to see just drip out of this passage, more than anything – is the relationship between Paul and this church – how much Paul loves the people in this church in Thessalonica.

So what I want to do is walk through the passage together, highlighting Paul's love for this church, and then I'll circle back at the end and explore some things it teaches us for how we are called to love the Church.

Walkthrough of Passage

17 But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart,

Remember – Paul was with the Thessalonians for about 3 months, because of riots in the city he and his missionary partners were forced to leave. So Paul again reminds them – I didn't willingly leave. I didn't abandon you. Don't believe the lies. I didn't want to leave – we were torn away.

The Greek word Paul uses here for "torn away" is often used in other ancient Greek writing to refer to a child being separated from their parents. Much more literally – we were "orphaned" from you, Paul writes. It was painful. It hurt.

BUT...he says – we were separated in person, not in heart. Me, Silas, Timothy – we haven't lost our love for you. SO...

we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, 18 because we wanted to come to you — I, Paul, again and again — but Satan hindered us.

Can you imagine getting that text message? "Hey man, I was trying to come to church this morning but...Satan got in the way...you know how it is." How do you respond to that if you're the Thessalonians? Hey - I wonder why Paul hasn't come to visit us? Because of satan...oh, ok...

Now – we don't know the specifics of what Satan hindering Paul looks like. Theologians speculate...

- It might be a recurring illness.
- Or it might be a government order by the same folks who drove him out of the city that prevents him from re-entering.

We don't know logistically why Paul hasn't been able to return. What we do know is how frustrating it is to Paul. **And that he attributes the inability to visit them to Satan himself.**

Which to our western, secular, non-transcendent minds might sound a bit strange - satan?

But when you zoom out and look at the Scriptures – it actually makes a lot of sense that Satan would not want Paul to visit these other Christians that he loves and wants to serve.

After all...

- If the 2nd greatest commandment according to Jesus (Matt 22) is to love your neighbor as yourself.
- If Jesus says the primary way people will know we're Christians is by how we love other Christians (John 13).
- And if the NT has over 59 commands specifically instructing us on how to treat others within the Church.

Then wouldn't it make sense that the enemy of God (Satan) would go out of his way to prevent Christians loving each other? To prevent Paul's ability to love this church?

If God's desire is that His people love one another and live in unity with one another, serve one another, care for one another, encourage one another – why wouldn't Satan be working to get in the way of that for Paul and the Thessalonians?

It is no surprise to Paul, and should be no surprise to us if the enemy of God is working to derail the love and unity of God's people.

He longs to see them but Satan keeps stopping him. V19...

19 For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? 20 For you are our glory and joy.

We wanted to come to you because you are our glory, our joy, and our crown of boasting at the return of Christ Jesus.

What does Paul mean by the “crown of boasting.”

- One day Christ is going to return. A conquering king, ushering in His forever kingdom.
 - And one of the things Christ is going to do when He returns is give out crowns to those who serve Him faithfully and well.
 - This is not the type of crown worn by a king made of silver or gold, but rather a wreath that would be given to someone who wins a race or a game – it’s the prize for the winner. A crown of victory and achievement.
 - Paul says it like this in **2 Tim 4:8 – 8 Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.**
- But what’s so wild about what he says here in v19 is that the crown that he is going to get from Jesus that says – “Well done, good and faithful servant” – is not Paul’s relationship to Jesus... **it’s the faith of the Thessalonians.**
- That when Paul stands before the throne...that Christ Jesus Himself would point, not to Paul, but to the Thessalonians and say “good job Paul. You were faithful to me. And I see that, because of these people’s faith.”
 - These Thessalonians, and their walking with Jesus, is evidence Paul your life was well-lived for me.

So of course he’s desperate to see them. But he can’t, so 3:1...

1 Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, 2 and we sent Timothy, our brother and God’s coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, 3 that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. 4 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. 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 tried and tried, couldn’t visit – Satan is hindering him. So he sends Timothy...for 2 reasons.

First, to **establish and exhort them in their faith.** To help build them up so that they would keep following Jesus over the long haul. That they wouldn’t fall away with the ongoing persecution and suffering they are facing.

I didn’t want you to be caught off guard by the pain that is associated with following Jesus. Paul’s like – “I told you, if you signed up to follow Christ, it was going to get worse before it got better. Even in those 3 months we were with you, we told you – that affliction and suffering are a part of the Christian life.”

But second – he also also sent Timothy to **get a report and learn about how they’re doing.** I don’t want my labor to be in vain – in other words – If they’re the evidence that Paul’s life was well-lived for the glory of God and his ministry was not in vain – he needs to make sure they’re doing okay. That their faith is strong. That they haven’t thrown in the towel on Jesus.

Timothy is sent to encourage their faith and learn about their faith.

6 But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you — 7 for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. 8 For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord.

As I mentioned last week – Pauls’ reputation in Thessalonica has come under fire, and so he has had to start defending his leadership to these people he loves and cherishes.

- And part of why he has been doing that is because he wants to defend the gospel. He doesn’t want them to think “if Paul’s a fake, so is Jesus” – so there’s a gospel reason.
- But also part of why he’s defending his leadership is because he doesn’t want these people that he loves and cares deeply for, to turn their backs on him, to abandon him.
 - Leaders aren’t robots. Paul is not a robot. He’s a human. With a soul. And emotions and feelings.
 - He loves this church. He cares deeply for this church.
 - He didn’t serve for their approval, but he does want them to love him as he loves them.

And Timothy comes back with a raving report about both – good news of their faith and their love for one another and for Paul.

9 For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, 10 as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

Paul is overjoyed, that joy breaks out into a prayer, a sort of “can’t contain his joy” moment as he thinks about what God is doing to preserve and take care of the Thessalonians...I’m so glad you’re walking with Jesus – I’m going to keep praying day and night I can come visit you and see you!

Paul wants to supply what is lacking. What he most likely has in mind here is that he wants to continue teaching them and pick up where he left off. He was only with them a few short months, and there’s more he wants them to know about Christ and following Him that would bolster and encourage their faith.

And then this part closes with almost like a – in case you need a hint at what I’m going to pray for, here it is...

11 Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, 12 and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, 13 so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

What is Paul’s prayer for them as he closes this section? More faith and more love.

- Paul has been worried about their faith and their love.
- He tries to visit and can’t, so he sends Timothy to encourage them and check in on their faith and their love.
- Timothy brings a great report about their faith and their love.
- And Paul concludes with a prayer that God might increase their faith and their love.

Paul’s Love for the Church

What a beautiful passage.

Now, the question becomes – what can we learn from Paul’s love for the Church in Thessalonica that might encourage and confront the way we love the church we are a part of today?

1. Paul longs to see them.

Paul hated being separated in the first place from the Thessalonians. And now he’s eager to get back to them and see them “face to face”.

In person. In the same city. In the same room. Letters aren't enough for Paul. Messages aren't enough for Paul. Reports from Timothy aren't enough for Paul.

He loves them. And his love for them means he wants to be *with them*.

**And this is a challenge for us. Christians, simply put, *want to be with other Christians*.
If you're a follower of Jesus, you ought to want to be with other followers of Jesus.**

This is one of our core values as a church – **presence – We are committed to being present to God and to each other.**

We are committed to showing up. Face to face. Prioritizing *being* together. This is the first non-negotiable step of love – you have to be face to face. You have to be willing to show up. You have to want to see them.

Bonhoeffer – “Everyone loves their neighbor until their neighbor is in their living room.”

It's easy to love from a distance. It's easy to love via text. But does your love make you eager to show up?

And I think this is a worthwhile gut check, because many of us when pressed would say – “I love my church. I love my community group. I love the Christian community in my life.”

But let's be honest, a lot of the time we're not all that eager to actually see them.

- Paul's like – “I'm trying to cross seas and walk for miles and miles to come see you! I'm praying night and day, Satan keeps stopping me.”
- But often we're like – “oh, traffic's bad? 20 minute drive? On a weeknight? And work was busy today? I'm good.”

Does your professed love for other Christians actually lead you to want to be there in their life?

Or to bring in 3:10 – when's the last time you prayed and asked God to help you show up face to face for people? That's what Paul writes in v10 – “We pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith.”

- Alright Lord, I know my tendency is to let work win.
- I know my tendency is to let busyness or chaos or tiredness run my schedule.

- Would you help me desire and prioritize showing up for people face to face?
- Would you take away the distractions I put in my life that keep me from showing up for your people?
- Would you help me see that maybe those things I allow in my life to crowd out time with your people might actually be a hindering of Satan?
 - I dk...worth considering. Boss calls a 7pm meeting the same night as community group – “Get behind me satan!”

Step 1 in love – do you want to be in the same room as other followers of Jesus and see each other face to face?

Christians want to be with other Christians.

2. Paul is willing to sacrifice for them.

It is a great cost to Paul to send Timothy to Thessalonica. He says in 3:1 – **3 Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone 2 and we sent Timothy...**

Athens at this time was a city full of idolatry and wickedness and emperor worship – not an easy place by any means to be a Christian or do gospel ministry. Paul loves having companions (never does his missionary journeys alone)...but he's willing out of love for the Thessalonians to be left alone in this godless and dangerous place, if it means he can send Timothy to encourage them and get a report of how they are doing.

This is costly for Paul, but he does it because he wants to build up the Thessalonians in their faith.

But this is what love does. Love, according to 1 Cor 13, is *not self-seeking*. Love sacrifices.

- Love says – your needs over mine.
- Love says – I will take the hit so that you are blessed.
- Love says – I'm willing to put my neck on the line to serve you.
- Love says – it was worse for me, but I was able to care for you.

"Don't go out of your way..." – "Only if it's not an inconvenience or a burden." That's the whole point of love! It is going out of our way. It is an inconvenience and a burden. And we do it – because we love them.

Love sacrifices.

It's worth asking – is my professed love for other Christians, for the Church, leading me to sacrifice for my brothers and sisters in Christ who are in need?

I'm not approaching my Christian community like a transactional relationship:

- What's in it for me?
- How does this benefit me?
- Do I like this?
- Does this cause me to have to bend my schedule a bit?

Love leads us to sacrifice – From "this was a bit difficult to I get nothing out of this at all and everything in between... But I'm gonna show up and give and care because I love them."

This is what John says in **1 John 3:17 – 17 But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need** (physical need, absolutely. But also spiritual need. Emotional need. Relational need – that person is alone, they keep saying they don't feel like they have friends, but they're a tough personality for me. Am I willing to sacrifice?), **yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? 18 Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.**

Love moves us to sacrifice.

3. Paul agonizes over their discipleship.

Paul takes ownership – not just to make sure he is following Jesus – we all have categories for that. He labors and toils and sweats with worry – over their following of Jesus. Are they remaining faithful? Are they loving one another? Are they holding fast to God?

Just look at these examples in the passage...

- 2:19 – The crown I'm going to receive from Jesus that tells me I lived my life well, I ran the race of faith, I followed Jesus well – is not my own life, my own sanctification – it's you guys.
- 3:5 – "I could bear it no longer, I sent... to learn about your faith."
- 3:8 – "We now *live*, because you stand fast in the Lord."
- 3:10 – "We pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and... supply what is lacking in your faith."

In our individualistic – I don't need anyone but me – and if they need me too much their clingy and co-dependent – culture, this is going to be hard for us.

The Scriptures expect you to also belong to a local church where you're invested in the discipleship of others and giving of yourself to help encourage and build up their life with God.

Hebrews 10:24-25 – 24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Could you imagine what a Paul-like level of concern over someone else's discipleship might look like for you?

- **Your crown of faithfulness before Jesus...**
 - Man – when I meet Jesus I'm going to hold up this person – in my community group, in my friend circle, in my church – and go "Look Jesus, my life was not in vain, because I did everything in my power to help them follow you."
 - They are my crown of boasting. I did my best to not just be zeroed in on my spiritual life, but to give everything I could to help them look like you.
- **Eager to learn about their faith...**
 - That church member who you know hasn't been around in a few weeks, or a few months – it aches in my heart... "I need to know how they're doing. I need to know if they're ok. How is their faith? Are they holding onto Jesus?"
 - I am so bummed I had to miss group time, not because I didn't get my chance to share, but because now I have no idea what's going on in these people's lives. I have no idea if they've been following Jesus well over the last week – and I can hardly bear it. I need to know about their faith and their love.
- **You can now live because they stand fast in the Lord...**
 - That person in group has confessed and confessed and confessed for months, or maybe even years – I don't pray. I don't pray. Can't find time to pray. And then tonight – they told us that this week they prayed every single day – "I CAN LIVE. They're doing it! They're following Jesus!"
 - Finally! I've literally been holding my breath. Went unconscious several times – but now they're doing it! YES.
- **Praying earnestly for them night and day...**
 - Night and day I'm eagerly bringing people before the Lord – Lord, multiply their faith. Increase their love.
 - Nothing wrong with praying for myself – it's just not my only times of prayer.
 - I'm laboring in prayer for the faith of others. Over their needs and concerns. Over their following of Jesus (or lack thereof).

Do you have a vision for what this could look like in your life? "Owning the discipleship" of another person.

SPECIFIC GROUPS:

- **Parents** – is this your first priority for your children? I want my kids, more than anything else – get into college, get a good career, be safe. Is my top priority – their discipleship to Jesus? Coming to know and walk with Jesus? Come to understand and believe in the gospel?
 - **I am so grateful for my parents who prioritized this for us.** They prioritized us being in church for worship. They prioritized us learning the Scriptures, knowing about Jesus. Did they do everything perfect? No, of course not – but it was certainly not for lack of effort.
- **Married** – is this your first priority for your spouse? My first goal is not their happiness, but their holiness. I'm willing to have the hard conversation because I want to help them look more like Jesus.
- **Church family** – is this how you think about this church family? If you're a member here – let me remind you you've not committed so much to an organization or a structure or a "ministry" – you've committed to a people. And part of that commitment was saying – "I'm going to be concerned about how they're doing following Jesus."
 - This is the **explicit goal** behind Community Groups. It's not for you to make friends. I hope that happens. That's great. But first and foremost it's to help each other know and follow Jesus.
 - A space for you to actively practice being concerned over someone else's discipleship.
 - And where you can put yourself in the position for someone else to be concerned about yours.

Conclusion

But this is weighty. And difficult, dare I say – impossible. Because people are hard to love. Easy to love in theory – difficult to love in reality.

So how do we get this love? How does this become the way we love one another?

Well let's consider Paul's story. This kind of love for the Church is shocking when you consider that it's the apostle Paul who's writing this letter...

- 15 years earlier Paul was not Paul. He was Saul. A well-renowned and well-respected Jewish religious leader. Top of his class. Followed all the religious rules.
- But he hated Christians. He hated the Church of Jesus.
 - He spent his life persecuting Christians. Being hostile towards Christians.
 - Made a living getting Christians thrown in jail and executed.
- But one day – he's on the road to Damascus with letters to have more Christians arrested when he has an encounter with the living God.
 - Jesus gets a hold of his heart – Paul surrenders his life over to Him as Lord and King.

And the guy who was once killing Christians now becomes the guy who writes letters like these full of love and affection and care.

What turns a heart from hostility or even indifference to love? **Being transformed by the love of Christ.**

If you want to love other Christians like the Bible calls you too - not just in fits and starts but in a committed, forgiving, over the long haul kind of love, don't start with trying to find Christians who are lovable (spoiler alert – they too will prove hard to love) – **start with Jesus.**

Because as is true in all of the Christian life, including loving the church – what Christ calls us to he first does for us.

Paul's love is modeled after and fueled by Christ's love.

- **Paul longs to see them** – Christ's love that brings him out of heavens and down to earth to walk with us. Condescends, lowers Himself at great cost to come and be face to face with His creation.

- **Paul sacrifices for them** – Christ’s love that sacrifices – the greatest sacrifice – the giving up of his life. Death on the cross – for us. There is no greater act of sacrificial love in history than the death of Christ for sin and sinners.
- **Paul cares about their discipleship, their hearts, their faith** – Christ’s love that fuels our discipleship. That he calls us back, on this stumbling journey of following him – time and time again. Offering us the light and easy yoke. Offering us the blessed life of the kingdom of God. He cares so deeply, not just that we believe in Him, but that we **walk** with Him. He constantly goes after our hearts – desiring to mold us and shape us and burn away anything that doesn’t look like him.

Christ’s love is the foundation for our love for one another.

So the call to love is simply the call (like all of the Christian life) to Christlikeness.

As Jesus himself says in **John 13:34-35 – 34 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. 35 By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”**

In Mother Theresa’s commentary on this passage she writes,

“These words of Jesus, ‘Even as I have loved you, also love one another,’ should be not only a light to us, but they should also be a flame. A flame consuming the selfishness that prevents the growth of holiness. Jesus ‘loved us to the end,’ to the very limit of love: the cross. This love for others then must come from within, from our union with Christ. Loving and being loved must be as normal to us as living and breathing, day after day until our death.”

This is our Savior – the one who loves us by laying down his life, calls us to do the same.

Pray.