

How To Be A Caring Christian

1 Thessalonians 3:1-13

Pastor John Miller

I heard a story of a little boy who was in a first-grade Sunday school class. He was asked by his teacher, "What is a saint?" Remembering that he had gone into the sanctuary and seen the stained-glass windows, he answered his teacher by saying, "A saint is someone who the light shines through." What a beautiful picture that is.

The Bible tells us that we're all saints. We sometimes forget that as Christians, we've been sanctified, set apart in Christ and the Bible declares us to be saints. We don't always live saintly lives, but positionally before Christ, we are indeed saints.

So my question is, "Is the light shining through you as a saint?" In this dark world, what we need today is Christians who are caring, loving and sacrificing themselves for others. So let the light shine through you.

In our text today, we see the light shining through the Apostle Paul. We see his pastoral love and care for the people of God.

Again, I want to remind you where we are in our study of 1 Thessalonians. In chapter 1, we saw Paul praising the Thessalonians for their faith, hope and love. Paul was actually talking about their good walk with God. In chapters 2 and 3, we find Paul is vindicating himself against the critics who attacked him. They told the Thessalonians that Paul had left them, because he didn't love them. And Paul didn't return to them, because he didn't care about them. So in chapter 3, Paul is explaining his absence. It is a continuation of chapter 2 where he is explaining that he was taken away from them without wanting to leave. He tried to return, but he said, "Satan hindered us."

So Paul now continues that theme, and there are two important sections where we see Paul's love and pastoral care for God's people. In verses 1-9, we see Paul's affectionate care; in verses 10-13, we see Paul's fervent prayer. In verses 1-9, we see Paul's affectionate care for the believers in Thessalonica. It is a pastor's heart opened up for His people. And in verses 10-13, we see his prayer for the people of God.

In the first section, verses 1-9, we see Paul's affectionate care. "Therefore, when we could no longer endure it..." Or he says, "We couldn't stand it any longer. We were torn away from you, and we wanted to know how you were doing." "...we thought it good to be left in Athens alone, and sent Timothy, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith, that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know. For this reason, when I could no longer endure it..."—he repeats what he said in verse 1—"...I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labor

might be in vain. But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always have good remembrance of us, greatly desiring to see us, as we also to see you—therefore, brethren, in all our affliction and distress we were comforted concerning you by your faith. For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord. For what thanks can we render to God for you, for all the joy with which we rejoice for your sake before our God?”

I want you to notice three things. First, Paul was concerned for them, verse 1. He says “Therefore.” This “therefore” joins what Paul said in chapter 3 with everything he said in chapter 2. In chapter 2, verse 20, Paul said, “For you are our glory and joy.” So Paul is affirming his love for them. He is saying, “You bring us glory and joy when we see you in the presence of the Lord.”

When Paul basically said that “We couldn’t stand it any longer,” or “We could no longer endure it,” I would paraphrase that as “We were freaking out. I was going crazy! I couldn’t stand it any longer! So I decided to be left alone in Athens, and I sent Timothy to know how you were doing.” So Paul is expressing his pastoral concern and love for them.

The background of this entire chapter is in Acts 17 and 18. These chapters explain what is going on in Thessalonica and why Paul says what he does in chapters 2 and 3 of 1 Thessalonians, which are historical and autobiographical. Paul is not instructing or teaching them here. He is just telling them about his love for them, why he left them and why he couldn’t get back to them. He is affirming his love for them and explaining his absence.

The point I want to make is that Paul unselfishly gave Timothy to go back to them to help them. Paul was willing to be left alone in Athens. When you are in a big city like Athens, you want companionship and fellowship; you want a friend.

I’ve traveled around the world, and some of the loneliest, most difficult times I’ve ever experienced is being on the other side of the globe in a big city all by myself. It’s a very lonely experience.

So Paul was willing to be left alone. He was sending Timothy to the Thessalonians to find out how they were doing. Paul gave himself for others out of his concern and love.

My question is, “Are you willing to give up your comfort? Are you willing to make a sacrifice for the sake of others?” In Philippians 2:4, Paul says, “Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.” He’s telling us not to be all self-absorbed with our own cares, concerns and affairs; we should be thoughtful and sacrifice for others and be a helper to them.

In verses 2-5 of our text, Paul’s concern turns into Paul’s commission where he sends someone to help them. He said he “sent Timothy...”—or “Timotheus,” which is Latin—“...our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the Gospel of Christ, to establish you and encourage you concerning your faith.”

Notice we have this reference to Timothy. The name “Timothy” means “one who honors God.” He is one of my favorite Bible characters, because he is a pastor, and I think pastors are awesome. I have an affectionate care for pastors. I know what they have to deal with. And Timothy was a young pastor. I started in my early 20s. I started pastoring at about 21 years of age.

And Timothy had to be encouraged by Paul. He told Timothy, “God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.” In 1 Timothy 4:12, Paul said, “Let no one despise your youth.” Paul wrote 1 and 2 Timothy, those two pastoral epistles to young Timothy. He was a traveling companion to Paul. And when Paul talked about Timothy in Philippians 2, Paul said, “I have no one like-minded who naturally will care for your state.” The words “like-minded” meant that Timothy was a “kindred spirit.” So Paul was willing to send Timothy to the Thessalonians, because Paul loved them and cared about them.

Now notice that Timothy’s character is mentioned in verse 2. Number one, he was called “our brother”; number two, he was called a “minister of God.” The word “minister” here is the word “diakonos,” from which we get our word “deacon.” But it’s not used in the formal sense of the office of deacon in the church; it just means that he was serving the Lord. The word “deacon” means “servant,” and it has in its etymology the idea of “stirring up dust,” because a servant who was a good servant would run around the house so rapidly serving that he would stir up dust. So he’s busy, fast moving and serving others. He’s a minister of God. And number three, Timothy was called a “fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ.” So he, along with the Apostle Paul, was a preacher of the Gospel and a “fellow laborer.”

Notice in verses 2-5, why Paul sent Timothy back. We have three reasons. Number one, it was “to establish you.” This phrase means “to strengthen you.” That would mean strengthening them in their faith by sharing with them God’s Word.

Number two, he was coming to them to comfort them. All this is Paul’s argument that he loved them. He was saying that he loved them so much that he was willing to be left alone. But he would send them his good companion, Timothy, to strengthen them in the faith and to comfort them. The word “comfort” means “to encourage.” The Greek word “Paraklétos” is used of the Holy Spirit, where it means “to come along side” and “to comfort,” or more likely “to strengthen.” It’s not the comfort of soothing somebody but to strengthen them by your closeness to them. So Timothy would come alongside them and encourage them. But I would translate verse 2, “strengthening you and encouraging you in your faith.” So Paul’s great concern for them was that they not falter, fail or be moved away from their faith in Jesus Christ.

How would Timothy strengthen and encourage them? The same way we would strength and encourage other believers—through the Word of God, through fellowship and through prayer. If you want to have a strong faith, you need the Word of God as your foundation, you need the people of God and you need to spend time praying to God one for another. So you must seek to help younger believers grow in their faith.

One of the overarching lessons from this chapter is that not only should we care about other believers, but we should help them grow. So we need to make the necessary sacrifices to help new, baby Christians or believers to be encouraged and strengthened in their faith.

Number three, Paul sent Timothy because the Thessalonians were in danger of being shaken, verses 3-5. He said, “No one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this. For, in fact, we told you before when we were with you that we would suffer tribulation, just as it happened, and you know. For this reason...”—Paul is driving home why he sent Timothy—“...when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter...”—being “Satan”—“...had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain.” They might have been knocked away from their faith in Jesus Christ.

I want you to note three, key words. In verse 3, the word is “afflictions”; in verse 4, the word is “tribulation”; and in verse 5, the word is “tempted.” These are all part of the Christian life; we have afflictions, tribulation and we are tempted. He doesn’t want us to be moved by these things. When a lot of Christians have afflictions, tribulation or temptations, they fall away from God. They turn their back on God, or they get overthrown in their faith.

Notice that verse 3 says, “No one should be shaken...”—or “moved” or “knocked off course”—“...by these afflictions.” The word “afflictions” means “pressuring or worrisome care; anxiety.”

I believe that Paul himself was sometimes anxious, concerned or worried. Peter wrote, “Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.” He knew what it was to have cares that needed to be cast upon the Lord. So Paul said that they were going through affliction, and the Thessalonians were too.

Jesus said, “In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” It’s funny that when you go to Hobby Lobby and look at all the Scripture plaques, you don’t see any with that Scripture on it. “Oh, I want that plaque for my kitchen!” Not really. But this is part of the Christian life. Pressure, care and then tribulation, verse 4. “In fact, we told you before when we were with you.”

By the way, we get some insight into the short time Paul was with them that he told them that life would be difficult. He said there would be tribulation, great times of suffering and sorrow.

Let me make it clear that this is not a reference to the great tribulation, which happens after the church’s rapture, after the Antichrist is revealed to the world and makes a covenant with Israel for seven years. I believe that the Bible teaches a pre-tribulation rapture, and we’re not appointed to wrath but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ. But we do go through tribulation in this life.

The tribulation that we Christians go through now has as its source—and this is the important distinction—the world, the flesh and the devil. The devil is mentioned in verse 5; he is called “the tempter.” “...the tempter had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain.” So the world,

the flesh and the devil are all actively attacking us, and we have tribulation.

But the great tribulation, after the church is “caught up...to meet the Lord in the air,” comes from God. God will then pour out His wrath upon the Christ-rejecting world. So there are two different sources for tribulation. Sometimes Christians get confused and think that they’re not promised to be free from tribulation, so why are we are promised to be free from the great tribulation, which is the seven-year period that is future to us. That’s not what Paul is talking about here. He’s talking about the tribulation they went through then.

Then there were temptations, as well, in verse 5. “For this reason, when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith.” He wanted to know how they were doing in their faith. “...lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labor might be in vain.” Back in chapter 2, verse 18, Paul mentioned that “Satan hindered us” from going to them.

Paul realized there really is a devil, he’s really active and he tries to make Christians stumble. So Paul was worried that the devil tempted them, and their work among the Thessalonians would be in vain.

Note how trials and temptations can strengthen our faith and help us to grow. Let me give you four ways how trials, afflictions and temptations can help you in your faith. Number one, they prove the reality of your faith. Someone said, “A faith that cannot be tested cannot be trusted.”

Years ago I met a guy who was building a plane in his garage. It’s crazy enough to fly a plane let alone build it yourself. This guy was in his 80s. But he built the plane, got in the plane and flew the plane. I’m thinking that if I built the plane, I’d hire somebody else to fly it—at least the first time. I’m going to make sure it works before I get in it, because I’m the one who built it. This guy had so much faith in what he did that he jumped in that plane, and it took off. So that plane passed the test of his approval.

You don’t want to drive over a freeway bridge unless it’s been tested. You don’t want to get into an airplane unless it’s been tested. If it’s the first time it has ever flown or the first time the pilot’s ever flown, you don’t want to join the flight. So your faith must be tested in order to be proven that it’s real, genuine, authentic faith.

Number two, these trials, temptations and afflictions deepen our fellowship with God and with other believers. They draw us deeper into fellowship with God. Florence White Willett said,

“I thank God for bitter things;

They’ve been a ‘friend to grace’;

They’ve driven me from paths of ease

To storm the secret place.”

You can actually look at your life and say, “That trial, that affliction, that difficulty brought me to my knees. It made me draw closer to God. It made me better, not bitter and I grew in my faith.

Number three, trials, tribulations, temptations and afflictions help remove the dross of sin from our lives. One of the ways God sanctifies us and makes us holy in a practical sense as Christians is by trials, sufferings and hardships. It helps to consume the dross of sin, to refine us as gold and to make us more like Christ.

Number four, they help us develop Christ-like character. If you value character over comfort, then your trials will not upset you; they’ll work for you for the glory of God when you realize they’re driving you to seek the Lord and be more like Christ.

Now in the third section, in verses 6-9, we have Paul’s comfort. Timothy returns from Thessalonica, he brings back a good report and that brings Paul comfort and joy. Paul said, “But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and brought us good news...” This is the only place in the New Testament where “good news” does not mean the Gospel but rather a “good report.” Timothy brought the “good news of your faith and love.” This is the Christian life: it’s faith toward God and love toward man. So they were loving God and loving others. “...and that you always have good remembrance of us, greatly desiring to see us.” Paul could have just said “always”; he could have just said “greatly”; or he could have just said “desiring.” But he put all three of them in there and said “always...greatly desiring.” It was for emphasis. “...as we also to see you.”

So Paul was actually saying, “Praise the Lord! They still love me—and I still love them.” There is something exciting about a church that loves their pastor and a pastor who loves the people and the relationship they have one with the other. Paul had love for these people of God.

Paul continues, “Therefore, brethren, in all our affliction and distress...”—he now uses a new word—“...we were comforted...”—again, it’s the idea of the Paraklétos or the Holy Spirit coming alongside him to encourage him—“...concerning you by your faith.” Paul says they were afflicted and distressed but they were relieved and comforted, because they now know the standing of the Thessalonians.

Now notice how Paul’s life was bound up in theirs, verse 8: “For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord.” Because Paul is not questioning whether or not they are standing fast but is affirming that they are standing fast, a better translation would be, “For now we live, since you stand fast in the Lord.” So notice how Paul’s life was bound up together with the life of the believers there in Thessalonica.

One of the reasons why I love pastors and I have a care and a compassion for them is because I am one. And I know that pastors carry the people of God on their hearts—twenty-four/seven. I don’t have a moment of time when you’re not on my heart, when I’m not praying for you and thinking about you and longing for your faith to be strengthened. It’s something that God does in a pastor’s heart.

So pastor Paul says, “Now we live, because you stand fast in the Lord. For what thanks can we render to God for you, for all the joy with which we rejoice for your sake before our God?” In 3 John 1:4, John said, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.” So it brought great joy to Paul’s heart. How marvelous that was.

In 2 Thessalonians 2:15, Paul said, “Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.” Paul said to stand in what they have been taught, the instruction in God’s Word that they had given the Thessalonians. So they were standing in the Lord. Paul wrote them the Word of God in 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and he said, “Hang on to that.”

One of my favorite New Testament commentaries was written by Warren Wiersbe. He said, “A working knowledge of the Bible is essential for spiritual growth and stability. God’s Word is food to nourish us, light to guide us and a weapon to defend us. ‘Thus saith the Lord’ is our sure foundation. One reason God has established the local church is that believers might grow in the Word and in turn help others grow also.”

It’s not just enough for you to hear a sermon on Sunday morning to be built up in the Word; you need to pray for, to care for and share God’s Word with other believers in the body of Christ, as well. Someone said, “Paul sent them a servant of God, he wrote them a letter from God and he brought them before the throne of God.”

That leads us into our next section, verses 10-13, Paul’s fervent prayer. Paul not only affectionately cared for them, but he fervently prayed for them. This is the dual function of a pastor: to care for God’s people, share with them God’s Word and then to pray for them.

Notice Paul said, “...night and day praying exceedingly that we may see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith. Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you...”—now notice this—“...so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming...”—or “parousia” or “appearing”—“...of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.” We can’t be sure, but I believe this is a reference to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. That is when He comes with all the saints and we enter into that kingdom age for 1,000 years.

I want you to note some things in this prayer of Paul’s. First of all, Paul actually prayed. Sometimes people ask, “Well, why should we pray if God already knows what we’re going to ask before we ask it, and God will only do what it is His will to do? Shouldn’t I just let it alone and let God do what He’s going to do?”

One of the reasons we pray is because Jesus prayed and Paul prayed, and they give us a pattern for our prayers. And it’s not just that they prayed, but the Bible actually tells us to pray. Sometimes I’ll answer people by just saying, “The Bible tells us to pray.”

“Yeah, but I don’t understand.” We don’t have to understand; we just need to pray. If God’s

Word says to pray, what should we do? If Jesus prayed, what should we do? If Paul prayed, what should we do? Pray. It's so very, very important.

Let me break this prayer down for you. We'll learn how to pray and what to pray for. How did Paul pray? He prayed frequently, verse 10: "night and day." And Jesus said, "Men always ought to pray and not lose heart." In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Paul said, "Pray without ceasing." Does that mean you always have to fold your hands, close your eyes and bow your head? No. That won't work why you're driving on the freeway. (And believe me, while you're driving on the freeway, you should be praying.) So it's not the action you have in prayer, but it's the attitude you have in prayer that's most important. You can talk to God in your heart. You can't take prayer out of the public schools, because you can talk to God in your heart at any time. You can be shooting prayers heavenward.

So not only do we pray frequently, but secondly, Paul prayed earnestly. In verse 10, we see that Paul was "praying exceedingly." The word "exceedingly" literally means "earnestly." Paul was frequently praying, "night and day." It was the pastor's heart for his people. And he was praying earnestly. James 5:16-18 says, "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain....And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain." So through a man just like us, Elijah, we see the power of an effectual, fervent prayer. How important that is. The Bible says, "You do not have because you do not ask."

Thirdly, Paul prayed specifically. God wants us to ask, but sometimes Christians' prayers are so general and so broad that I think God scratches His head and says, "I don't know how I can answer that." I've heard people pray, "Save the world." "Just bless everybody." God wants us to zero in and be specific in our prayers.

And notice the three things Paul prayed for. You can pray these over me anytime. First, he prayed for them to have a perfected faith, verses 10-11. He said, "...that we may see your face and perfect what is lacking in your faith." The word "perfect" means "to bring to maturity." It doesn't mean to bring to perfection, as we would use the word. It just means to grow it or develop it. It was used of a torn fishing net that would be mended and become useful. We want a faith that is useful—growing and developing.

God wants our faith to grow. How does that happen? By the Word of God, by prayer, by trials and afflictions and troubles. Don't be moved by your trials; be strengthened by them and by the Word of God. So Paul prayed for a perfected faith.

By the way, in verse 11, it says, "Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you." Paul couples together "God and Father" with "our Lord Jesus Christ." This indicates the deity of Jesus Christ. Jesus is God the Son, coupled with His Father; He is indeed coequal in essence with God the Father. Paul says may He "direct our way to you." Paul still wanted to return to the Thessalonians.

Then, secondly, Paul prayed for an abounding love, verse 12. “And may the Lord...”—that no doubt is a reference to the “Lord Jesus Christ,” in verse 11—“...make you increase and abound in love to one another...”—to the believers in the body of Christ—“...and to all, just as we do to you.”

We want to scribble out “and to all” from that verse. It’s easy to love Christians; it’s not so easy to love non-Christians. But love is a mark of a true Christian. It’s not just love for the believers—that’s paramount—but love for unbelievers, even for the world. Your love should abound to all men, Paul said, “just as we do to you.” This love is the Greek word “agape.” So Paul prayed for a perfected love and an abounding love that would overflow to one another and to the world around them.

Thirdly, Paul prayed specifically for them to have a purifying hope, verse 13. “...so that He may establish your hearts...”—this is a reference not to the organ but to the whole person, the personality, the inner person—“...blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.”

Paul is talking about practical, holy, Godly, Christian living right now. He’s not talking about when we get raptured or when we get to heaven and see the Lord, when we will be completely sanctified. He’s talking about the process of sanctification while on earth. “At the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints” is His Second Coming, and that should motivate us now. Heaven is not just a destination; it’s a motivation.

Now we have come to the end of chapter 3, where there is a reference to the coming again of Jesus Christ. At the end of chapter 1, verse 10 has to do with the Lord’s coming and our salvation. It says, “Wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.” In chapter 2, verse 19 has to do with service. “For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?” Now at the end of chapter 3, verse 1, the coming of the Lord has to do with sanctification, stability and Christian living. “...that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.”

So the coming again of Jesus Christ is practical. If I believe Jesus is coming back, what should I do? I should be living a holy life. It is an influence to holy living; it motivates us to salvation, service and to sanctification and living stable, holy, Godly lives.

So do you pray for others frequently, earnestly and specifically? Do you pray that their faith will be growing, that their love will be abounding, that their hope would be a purifying hope—that they would live in the hope of the coming again of Jesus Christ?

First, I exhort you as church members that you would love and serve one another, the people of God. You don’t just come to church and listen to a sermon. You love one another. That’s what Paul is doing in this whole chapter. It just breathes out the apostle’s love: his love for them, his

care for them, his concern for them. They loved him and he loved them, they loved one another and they even loved people outside their church. So we should be abounding in love for the people of God and others.

Secondly, we should be sharing with one another the Word of God. Paul wrote them two letters called 1 and 2 Thessalonians to strengthen them. In chapters 4 and 5 of 1 Thessalonians, Paul gives them instructions. Chapter 1 is a commendation, chapters 2 and 3 is vindication and chapters 4 and 5 is instruction. Chapters 4 and 5 is the teaching part of the book of 1 Thessalonians. We, as the body of Christ, need to share the Word of God with the people of God; not just the pastor.

Thirdly, we need to frequently, fervently and specifically pray for others before the throne of God.