

We are continuing our series called Revive. We've been looking at several of the benedictions or blessings in the Bible. Benediction is defined as a good word, and that's what a benediction is—a good word spoken to us and for us. But it's also a prayer because the one who speaks it is asking God to do something for the people he's speaking to. When we hear a benediction, we get to actually listen in on how God wants to act in our lives for good.

Today, we come to the benediction of love. I find myself almost hesitating to say that because the idea of love is so misunderstood and misused in our culture. I was walking through my gym this week and saw a large poster hung from the ceiling, which read, "Love is Love." I had to stop for a moment and ask myself, what does that really mean? I guess it means we shouldn't judge whatever particular expressions of love we see today. Love is love. Don't judge how or what I choose to love. Don't say how I choose to love isn't love. No one has a monopoly on what love looks like or how it should be expressed. Love is love so just accept it for what it is even if it's different from how you love.

Part of me agrees with that. We certainly need more love in our world today. In the past five years, we've seen an increase in polarization and hate in our nation, particularly since the 2016 election, and this is true regardless of how you voted. And didn't Jesus tell us the whole law of God could be summed up in just two commandments—love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself?

But another part of me disagrees. The Bible encourages us to be discerning about love. The apostle John wrote, "***Do not love the world or the things of the world***" (1 John 2:15). The apostle Paul prayed in Philippians, "***that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ...***" (Philippians 1:9–10). You see love must not be separated from knowledge, insight, discernment, and purity. The Bible even says there are certain things the Lord hates (Proverbs 6:16–19).

My point is we can't separate love from a moral standard. Love requires a moral center of right and wrong. Not all love is right. There's a higher moral law by which all love and should be evaluated. And that's what we're going to see in this benediction of love found in 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13.

The apostle Paul wrote this letter to a church in Thessalonica. This was a city of about 200,000 people located at the head of

the Thermaic Gulf. It was a coastal town on the major Roman road running eastward from Rome. As a seaport, it was one of the largest, most important commercial centers in the region of Macedonia. It was a cosmopolitan metropolis inhabited by people from all over the known world. Barbaric Germanic people from the North lived there, bringing with them their pagan religion and culture. Greeks lived there, bringing the philosophic wisdom of Aristotle, Socrates, and Plato. Romans from the West also settled there. They were mostly retired soldiers who brought their strength of will, wealth and political power. Finally, Jews came in large numbers from the East. They brought with them their unique faith in just one God and their prejudices against non-Jews as well.

When Paul arrived in Thessalonica, he caused quite a stir. As was his custom, he went into the synagogue and began to argue Jesus was the Messiah. The response was mixed. Some Jews were persuaded by Paul's arguments, as well as some Gentiles. But others were hostile toward this new movement and created a mob who launched an all-out riot in the city. The mob began frantically looking for Paul and Silas. Having not found them, they dragged some of the believers in front of city officials and began declaring, "***These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here...They are defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus***" (Acts 17:6–7). As a result, Paul was forced out of the city and had to leave this young church abruptly. He went to Corinth where he wrote them this letter.

Imagine for a moment you're one of these believers. You're part of a new community called the church made up of Greeks, Romans, Germanics, and Jews. You're living in a hostile moment when oppression from both non-believing Jews and the Roman Empire is at its height. Your natural disposition is to stay aloof from those in the church who are so different from you and resent those who are oppressing you. But then you receive this letter from Paul who's been was run out of town. In the middle of the letter, you read this benediction.

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. (1 Thessalonians 3:11–13)

I want us to look at this benediction and see how important it is that we love one another, as well as how real love has a moral center of holiness.

Love is Empowered by God Through Prayer

One of the things I don't want you to miss is that love for one another is empowered through prayer. As I said a moment ago, this benediction is a form of prayer. The apostle Paul, who'd seen many of these people become Christian, is praying their love might increase. In doing so, he teaches us apart from God's intervention we'll not be able to love the way he wants us to love. It's interesting how he invokes "God our Father and Jesus our Lord." He's our Father, and he loves us with a Father's love. Jesus is our Lord who demonstrated his great love for us by paying the price for our sins.

Paul does something unique here, which would certainly have stood out to the original audience. This may seem a bit complicated, but Paul starts this prayer with a plural subject, "*Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus...*" Two persons—God the Father and our Lord Jesus, but he goes on to use a singular verb. In Greek, the subject and verb always match in number, meaning a plural subject demands a plural verb, and a singular subject, a singular verb. But Paul doesn't do that here, and this makes for a weird sentence in the original. The question is, why? I believe by using a plural subject with a singular verb; Paul reminds us that God the Father and Jesus our Lord unified, and maybe he's even hinting at the fact that they're unified in love, just as he wants **us** to be unified in love. The Father said to his Son at his baptism, "*This is my Son, whom I love.*" Jesus once said, "*I and the Father are One,*" and "*I love the Father and do exactly what my Father has commanded me*" (John 10:30; 14:31).

So as we enter into prayer, it's a good thing to ask the Father and the Son to help us embody the same kind of love for one another that exists between them. There's no way we can manufacture this love on our own; it has to come through **his** work in our lives.

Love Expresses Itself in a Desire to be With Others For Their Good

And look at what Paul prays for. He starts out and prays for God to "*clear the way for us to come to you.*" The verb has the idea of "making straight or level." The idea is of clearing a road so all unevenness is leveled and travel made easier. Again, this is a prayer, so Paul sees God as able to create circumstances in our lives, which smooth the way for us to love one another in tangible ways. You see being **with** someone is an expression of love. A bit later in this benediction, Paul mentions his own love for them, and this is partly how this love is manifest—he wants to be **with** them.

This was a big deal to Paul. Listen to what he wrote to them in chapter 2,

"But, brothers and sisters, when we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you. For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan blocked our way."
(1 Thessalonians 2:18–20)

So in chapter three, Paul said he sent Timothy to them to strengthen them in their faith. And when Timothy came back with a good report of how they were doing, Paul said he's "*encouraged about you because of your faith.*" Yet, still, Paul aches to be with them. He says, "*Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith*" (1 Thessalonians 3:10).

So Paul longs to be with them because he loves them and wants to see them continue to grow spiritually. Love expresses itself in a desire to be with others for their good. Love is incarnational. The doctrine of the incarnation says God loved us so much he took on a human body and human nature; he "was made flesh" so he could be with us and ultimately rescue us. I think of our team of families who just got home from Honduras on Friday. We could have just sent those folks in Honduras a nice letter and told them how much we loved them. But as a natural expression of love, we wanted to be **with** them. There's something about being present and showing up. That's what love does.

Love Isn't a Static Thing; It Must Increase and Overflow More and More

No doubt when Paul was with them he taught them all about love. In fact, several times in this letter he commends them for their love. He opened the letter by saying he always thanks God for them as he remembers their "*labor prompted by love*" (1 Thessalonians 1:3). Later he said, "*Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all of God's family throughout Macedonia*" (1 Thessalonians 4:9–10a).

So they did have love, but notice here in this benediction Paul prayed the Lord Jesus might cause their love to "*increase and overflow.*" Love isn't a static thing; it must increase and overflow. It's like a body of water that needs a fresh source and an outlet, or it becomes stagnant. For love to stay alive, it must increase and overflow.

As you might have guessed, the Greek word here is *agape*. The essence of *agape* love is goodwill, benevolence, and willful delight in the object of love. Unlike our English word love, *agape* isn't used in the New Testament to refer to romantic love. Nor does it refer to the natural affections you might feel for a good friend. *Agape* love involves faithfulness, commitment, and an act of the will. In the old King James Version of the Bible, this word was translated "charity." I like that translation because love is so overused

and misunderstood today; whereas, charity has substance to it. This *agape* love or charity is beautifully described in 1 Corinthians 13:4–7. I like the way The Message translates this:

Love never gives up.
Love cares more for others than for self.
Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.
Love doesn't strut,
Doesn't have a swelled head,
Doesn't force itself on others,
Isn't always "me first,"
Doesn't fly off the handle,
Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,
Doesn't revel when others grovel,
Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,
Puts up with anything,
Trusts God always,
Always looks for the best,
Never looks back,
But keeps going to the end. (1 Corinthians 13:4–7)

That's what love looks like; that's how it's recognized; that's what we're to increase in and overflow with. You see, more than anything else this is the mark of a successful church. I meet with lots of pastors, and they often talk about success in ministry and how to measure a thriving church. But their measure of success is almost always that of numbers. I call it "butts and bucks"—how many butts are in the seats and many bucks are in the offering. In the New Testament, success is gauged more by how people love each other, forgive one another, bear one another's burdens, pray for one another, and reach out to those in need around them.

Love Includes Those Within and Outside the Family of God

Notice **who** is to be the recipients of this love: for each other and for everyone else. When you read, "*each other*," it means the family of God or the believing community/church you're a part of. Our first responsibility is to love our brothers and sisters in Christ. Remember, the church in Thessalonica was made up of people from very different backgrounds, so this wouldn't have been easy. One of the things I'm so proud of in this church is our diversity. That's true ethnically, socio-economically, politically, and generationally. In a world that is more and more divided, we can stand out as a community who loves despite our differences. Church is one of the few places left that welcomes folks from different generations, social classes, economic classes, and racial distinctions. The church is a community of "differents" who embody love in a culture of hate.

That's not all. Our love is to increase and overflow "*for everyone else*" as well. He broadens his focus outward beyond the walls of the church. Remember Paul is writing this letter to people who were being mistreated and victimized by many of those very people. How do you love your enemies? How do you love those

who hate what you are and what you stand for? Remember Jesus taught us in the Sermon on the Mount it's easy to love those who love you, but what will really make you stand out and reflect the nature of God is if you love those who hate you.

Kim Shin-Jo started out as a trained killer from North Korea. In January of 1968, Shin-Jo and a team of assassins attempted to kill the president of South Korea. In the process, 30 South Koreans were killed, and Kim Shin-Jo was captured. After months of interrogation, through a surprising friendship with a South Korean army general, Shin-Jo's hard heart started to soften. Later he'd confess, "I tried to kill the president. I was the enemy. But the South Korean people showed me sympathy and forgiveness. I was touched and moved." The South Korean government eventually released him, and he became a Christian and a pastor. His encounter with Christ came through the unexpected, surprising love of an army officer who accepted him, befriended him, and believed in him. At one time, he was the enemy of the South Korean people, but in the spirit of Jesus, they surprised him with the startling gifts of belonging, forgiveness, and even citizenship. In the same way, God unleashes tremendous power for good when we surprise the world, especially unlovable people, and even our enemies, with unconditional love, friendship, and forgiveness.

So this love starts with us loving each other and then extends out to others. New Testament scholar, Marianne Thompson, reflects this tension between loving the church family and "everyone else" well. She writes,

"...the Christian community is the school in which we learn to love. Like great musicians who practice tedious drills for long hours, Christians practice their scales at home in order to sing in public. In the community love is commanded and modeled, and here is where it must be lived out and practiced. This does not mean that love is limited to the boundaries of the community. But if the community does not live by the model and teaching of its founder, Jesus, how can it expect others to do so or to hear its call to join with them?"

Without question, this is a difficult task to embark on. And ultimately it's a lifelong process of learning to increase and overflow in love in every area of our lives. But ask yourself the question: Am I growing, increasing, and overflowing with love? The best way to do that is to start loving as an act of the will. In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis said the way to become more loving isn't to sit and wait until you feel loving towards someone, but just do it. He wrote,

"Do not waste time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you're behaving as if you loved someone, you'll presently come to love him."

If you want your love to increase and overflow, start loving.

Love is the Soil in Which Holiness Grows to Perfection

But maybe this also raises a question. Going back to what I said earlier, is it true—"love is love?" Doesn't love have a moral center? Isn't it grounded in something bigger and more transcendent?

As you might have guessed, the answer is yes. And this comes out clearly in v. 13,

"May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones." (verse 13)

Unfortunately, that's a bad translation of the original Greek. The NASB puts it more literally. It says, "*...so that He may establish your hearts blameless and holy before our God and Father...*" Do you see the difference? Paul wants us to increase and overflow with love so that he may establish our hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus.

So this isn't a separate request, but an extension of the request that we grow in our love for one another. The purpose of loving one another is so we might be blameless and holy before God when Jesus returns. Love is the soil in which holiness grows toward perfection.

What does holiness mean? The Hebrew word for holy is *qodesh* and means "apartness, set-apartness, sacredness." In the New Testament, the word for holy is *hagios*, meaning set apart, sacred, and worthy of veneration. God is holy because he's totally separate and above His us in his perfection. But he also calls us to be holy, he calls us to be set apart for him, and this is both a process of growth as well as a state of being we'll possess when we see Jesus face to face. One day we'll stand before him holy and blameless, and the hope we have of seeing Jesus fuels our pursuit of holiness today.

It's like you have to take a big test in school, which will decide what you'll be allowed to study in the years that follow. Your teachers ensure you are well prepared for the test, but they don't tell you exactly when you'll be taking the test. You wish they did because then you could study hard the night before and be ready on the day. But the teachers believe everyone should always be ready for the test—ready any day. That's Paul's logic about Jesus' return. We don't know the day he'll return, but no matter when it happens, we need to be prepared. And a big part of being prepared means learning to love others with knowledge, discernment, purity, and righteousness the way he's loved us.

Notice how he said Jesus will return with his "*holy ones.*" He's talking about both angels and believers who die before the Lord returns. Could this just be a little hint we'll be united throughout eternity with these folks? This is our hope that one day we'll be united in love not just with God, but with one another. It reminds me of a little rhyme I've heard:

Oh to dwell above with saints we love,
that will be glory.
But to dwell below with saints below,
well, that's another story!

Real love is holy love. Real love is love with a moral center that acts for the betterment of the one loved. God is inviting you into this kind of love. He's inviting you to experience his love demonstrated on the cross. We need to lay our life down for each other, as he did for us. May you find yourself embraced by His holy love, so you embody this holy love in a world, who desperately needs it.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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