

Growing Faith, Increasing Love, Ongoing Perseverance (part 1)

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Date: 13 March 2024

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[0:00] Well, wonderful to be with you this evening.

And I must correct, Ife, we are footballers.! We're both footballers. That's right. Right? You know, for the lesson... No, we have to use that word.

But it has been wonderful to get to know Ife here in town. We're so thankful that he and Lisa have come to town with their boys.

And not only have we had chances to go out and kick a ball together and have that kind of fellowship as pastors together in the Iron Club, but also the kids have been able to play together as well, which has been wonderful.

If you do have your Bibles with you, you want to open them up possibly to the book of 2 Thessalonians.

[1:00] And we'll draw from 2 Thessalonians and the first letter as well. So, 2 Thessalonians.

Yeah. 2 Thessalonians. That's how the British say it. It's shorter. Shorter. So, in this Lenten series, you have been thoughtfully, prayerfully examining the call to maturity.

Paul's aim, inspired by the Holy Spirit, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. A call that begins with Christian assurance and demands our spirit-empowered toil, our strenuous efforts to become like Christ.

And last week, you considered the centrality of God's Word to accomplish this outcome. And this week, we will consider the marks of maturity evident in the young church of Thessalonica.

In Acts chapter 17, we hear about Paul's first visit to Thessalonica. With Silas, Paul reasoned in the synagogue for three weeks.

[2:38] And then jealousy grew up among some of the Jews and led to a riot there. And for their safety, Paul and Silas were sent away by the brothers in Thessalonica.

And about three to five years later, Paul's first letter is sent after this hasty departure. And we hear Paul's gratitude for God's gracious work among them.

He reminded them of their faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. He assured them that their calling was because of our gospel.

It came to you in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit with full conviction. And they had received the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit.

And by the time of Paul's writing, this young church had become an example, he said. An encouragement to all of Macedonia and southern Greece called Achaia and beyond, Paul says.

[3:47] So Paul says to them in his first letter, you've done your bit. Enjoy some rest. Consider what you've done and your elevated position and eat some delicious suvlaki and baklava on me.

Not quite. Paul says, may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all as we do for you.

So 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.

And Paul, in this first letter to the Thessalonians, repeats the phrase more and more. He urges them to walk and please God just as you are doing that you do so more and more.

He says that they have been taught by God to love one another. For that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you to do this more and more.

[4:59] With these earlier words of affectionate urging, we sense Paul's great pleasure in the opening of his second letter to the Thessalonian church.

And so let's read just the first four verses of two Thessalonians. Paul and Silvanus and Timothy. To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right.

Because your faith is growing abundantly. And the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore, we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith.

In all of your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring. Their faith is growing abundantly, he says.

[6:06] Their love for everyone and for one another is increasing. They are remaining steadfast, persevering in the midst of persecutions and afflictions.

They have the indelible marks of a maturing church. So Paul is delighted that the reports from Thessalonica indicate that his prayers and urgings in his first letter have borne fruit in this young church.

They're growing in faith. They're increasing in love. And they are continuing in perseverance. First of all, praise the Lord.

His spirit empowers us and motivates us to desire and pursue spiritual maturity. What does the world desire around us?

It whispers. It sings. Or even shouts. Whatever you want, do. Anywhere you want to do it.

[7:12] Let's do it. Let's do it without worry. Let's not be concerned about money or safety or guilt or shame. Only that we may do what we want to do.

But the reality is that this kind of life is completely unsatisfying. It is a lie. A myth straight from the father of lies himself.

So we must begin with the realization that maturity in Christ is precisely the most satisfying life that we can live. Do you believe that?

That this is the most satisfying life that we can live. Praise the Lord. His spirit empowers us and motivates us to desire and pursue this kind of spiritual maturity.

He wants to give the best life to us. The best life we can possibly receive and live on earth. But it does not look anything like what our flesh, the devil, and the world would have us believe.

[8:19] In the short time we have tonight, I have been asked to say something about how a growing faith, an increasing love, and perseverance are manifested in a church marked by brokenness and dependence and forgiveness.

Something about these marks of maturity that will be commensurate with the nourishing soup and bread that we've all been enjoying.

First off, let me offer something like a definition of these three marks of Christian maturity. A growing faith is a growing personal relationship with God that includes trusting God's word and promises.

And therefore, walking in obedience. And increasing love is that affection expressed in thought and word and action that conspires to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

And perseverance that is committed to staying the course through every high and stormy gale.

Through persecution and affliction, though they crash into the bulwark of the church, we will not be moved.

[9:44] I turned 49 a short time ago. And to some of you, that seems old. And to some of you, that's only just getting somewhere.

I've seen enough to know that maturation takes some time. And this fact is quite humbling.

It is humbling that I can earnestly seek to grow in faith and love and perseverance. And still, it takes time.

Still, it takes time. And the danger of this is to make allowances for our lack of maturity. Perhaps we say, well, this is just who I am.

Or God is at work and I'm just a slow learner. We can make the gradual nature of our progress license for continuing in sin.

[10:42] The time it takes to mature can become an excuse for a lack of real effort to be holy and loving and strong. I was talking recently to someone whose marriage is in very bad shape.

And I was describing for him God's wonderful design for marriage. And he said, well, that is ideal. But my marriage isn't like that. His point was, well, sure, that's ideal. But real life isn't ideal.

There's truth to that. It's much harder than we sometimes think to have a wonderful and beautiful marriage.

But it's also a really bad idea to start talking about a good and healthy and beautiful marriage as something that, well, that's an ideal.

[11 : 49] Maybe some people have it, but it's not for me. It's just an ideal. As Christians, we perceive that this ideal is for us and that God, by his power, can manifest it in our lives.

The opposite danger is to despair in our slow progress or even give up because of a big failure, perhaps, in our lives. We can grow bitter, depressed, or impatient with ourselves, with others, with God, because maturity does take time.

And then, of course, there's the danger of pride, of comparing ourselves to another instead of to Christ. With God's help, we can navigate all these dangers and humbly seek perfection.

He makes everything beautiful in his time. And so we can run with every effort and allow for the time it takes to grow into the fullness of Christ.

It's so hard not to chase that ball. That's okay. That's all right. I don't mind. I'll just, I'll try to. I've also noticed that maturing, becoming complete or fully formed at something, takes a lot of repetition.

[13 : 29] Whether we're playing sports or cooking or making quilts, training as a carpenter, a teacher, it takes loads of repeated practice, doesn't it?

We must do it again and again and again and again and again and again and again. And it must be done with the proper technique. Repetition with poor technique can actually form habits that harden us into a permanent immaturity spiritually.

And so as we're pursuing growth in faith and love and perseverance, we recognize that this will take a great deal of practice. Repetition and attention to the proper form will be indispensable.

To developing godly maturity. In our repetition, we become aware of poor technique.

The wrong way to go about things. We strengthen certain muscles. We get more flexible in certain ways and become more immovable in others.

[14 : 43] We establish ways of thinking and even form reflexes. As Paul says to the young pastor of Ephesus, rather train yourself for godliness.

For while physical training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way. As it holds promise for the present life and for the life to come.

As the writer of Hebrews says, But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained their senses to distinguish good from evil.

Now as we give ourselves to this training in godliness, part of the Holy Spirit's work is to help us not give up.

Though it takes time. Part of the Holy Spirit's work is to reveal our poor form to us. Certain attitudes and behavior that he wants to change or remove.

[15 : 45] And we can quench the Holy Spirit if we ignore his promptings. Is the Spirit prompting you to change in some area of your life at this moment?

Do not ignore his promptings. It is a personal work that he does in each of us. Is there a place where he is showing you the way forward?

For greater love, faith, and perseverance. Take a moment to think. What might be that area? God is calling you into greater maturity.

I have observed these two facts about maturation.

That it takes time and long repetition. Practice. And these two aspects of the process cultivate and enhance the qualities of brokenness that marks the mature church.

[17 : 04] Why? Because we are always aware of our already and not yet sanctification. We are always mourning our sin and aware of our need to continue to mature in faith and love and perseverance.

And our understanding of brokenness does not end at the tip of our noses. We recognize that the church is filled with people just like us.

Just like us. Forgiven saints that have entered a process that takes time and long repetition of godly practice.

And this helps us bear with one another. In his first letter to Thessalonica, Paul describes this situation in his final instructions.

And if your Bible is still open to Thessalonians, you can just look over on the other page and you'll find 1 Thessalonians, chapter 5, and beginning in verse 12.

[18:18] Paul says, We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.

Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with them all, see that no one repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit.

Do not despise prophecies, but test everything. Hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil. Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely.

May your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful. He will surely do it.

[19:33] Notice the respect and love given to the pastors who the Lord gives to oversee and admonish. Notice that Paul suggests that there will be a need for correction and for encouragement and for patience in the assembly of believers because of their idleness, because of faintness, because of weakness, because of evil.

Nevertheless, they are always to seek to do good to one another. And finally, we notice the promise and confidence in God's complete sanctifying work that ends emphatically in these verses.

He who calls you is faithful. He will surely do it. And so this last confident promise speaks to the quality of dependence that is also a mark of the mature church.

In all of the time it takes and in the repetition of practice and godliness, there is the humility and gratitude and reverence that this ready and regular acknowledgement and confidence that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion.

And this is not rooted in who I am apart from God. It is rooted in who he is. He who calls you is faithful.

[21:01] He will surely do it. Now, I would submit that a church growing in faith and love and perseverance will manifest these qualities of brokenness and dependence upon God.

And I would submit to you that the church with these qualities will be marked by forgiveness expressed towards one another. Because forgiveness is the natural logic, the melody that is created by instruments and orchestras that are marked by brokenness and dependence.

And I would remind you of Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant. It is such a striking and challenging parable for us. We are confronted with the very human tendency not to forgive others. But this tendency is seen for all of its pettiness and ugly small-mindedness in the context of God's great forgiveness.

The king who is willing to wipe out the huge debt of his servant. We are left to ask who who could withhold forgiveness when we have been forgiven so much greater a debt.

[22:29] And the point of the parable is to make the unforgiving servant appear ridiculously harsh and hard of heart. The king in the parable has to address him as, oh wicked servant, how could you not forgive your fellow servant this small debt when I have forgiven you everything.

But having said that, how difficult it is to forgive. How difficult it is for us. Is it not? The small slights, the small sneers, a little comment here or there, being snubbed, being just not the favorite is often something that we have a hard time forgiving.

let alone when someone calls us something or does something towards us that is intentional and not nice. Nevertheless, Jesus calls us to forgive in light of his tremendous loving forgiveness towards us.

again, our brokenness and dependence comes to our aid. Our brokenness keeps our own sinfulness before us.

Our dependence upon God reminds us that without God's forgiveness, we are undone. Without his grace, we would do the same. We would be wicked servants ourselves.

[24:09] Who will not forgive our fellow servants, but for the grace of God. At this point, I hope that I have said something helpful, but I think I have not said much about perseverance.

And so let's spend a little time thinking about perseverance in the face of persecution and affliction. Because we may well be on the precipice of greater persecution and affliction.

in our context. Here let me return to Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians.

And there are various things that might help us grow in perseverance. Certainly the awareness of our own sin and readiness to forgive others are important ingredients as we experience persecution

and trials of various kinds.

And certainly the outcome of perseverance is desirable. That perseverance produces in us character. And character hope, and hope will not disappoint, because God has poured his love into our hearts.

[25 : 28] things. But Paul provides another important encouragement in the face of suffering. In 2 Thessalonians 1, verses 5 to 8, if you look at it there, 2 Thessalonians chapter 1, beginning in verse 5, just after those first four verses that we began with, he says, this is the evidence, that is, your steadfastness in faith in all of your persecutions and afflictions that you are enduring, this is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God for which you are also suffering.

Since indeed, God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might. When he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

We cannot spend a long time here, so let me highlight a few key things that Paul uses to encourage the Thessalonians in their ongoing trial, their persecutions and afflictions.

He says their persecution is evidence that they have been considered worthy to suffer for the kingdom of God.

[27 : 28] I want you to notice that if a church causes no offense in the world, there is a problem. The gospel is an offense.

Light pierces darkness, darkness, and darkness hates light because their deeds are exposed. A church that does not offend the world is a church that has ceased to bear the message of repentance and salvation through Jesus Christ.

It is without the light of life. It, according to Paul's logic here, cannot be considered worthy to suffer for the kingdom of God.

persecution is a good sign that you are being counted worthy. What an honor. Secondly, the experience of affliction, Paul says, is evidence that God himself will afflict those who inflict your persecution.

Their injustice is an ironic reminder that God's true justice is coming. It is evidence that Christ will return and he will settle the books.

[28 : 55] Thirdly, Paul says that God's coming judgment will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of Jesus. But it will also exalt the saints, so that those considered worthy of persecution will be vessels of Jesus' glorification.

On that day, we are to be exhibits of God's great new covenant work, bearing the marks of maturity in love and faith and perseverance, manifested as a body together and as individuals in brokenness and dependence and forgiveness.

Who is sufficient for these things? There's a bumper sticker someone reminded of me actually last Sunday. God is coming soon.

Look busy. But of course, we don't want to simply look busy. We want to be about his work to bring to full maturity onto the day of Jesus Christ.

He who has promised is faithful. He will do it. That is our confidence. I want to conclude now with a prayer from two Thessalonians that's fitting, I think, to end our talk.

[30 : 33] Two Thessalonians chapter 1 and these found in verses 11 and 12. Father, we pray that you may make this church worthy of your calling.

That you may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by your power so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in them and in him according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen. Amen.