

Paul's Greeting Card

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

INTRODUCTION

- A. Hallmark, the world's leading greeting card manufacturer, wraps up its mission statement in that most famous phrase, "When you care enough to send the very best."
- B. It's that time of the year again—the time for people to send their very best.
 - 1. There are many ways people send their very best this time of the year—they mail packages of goodies or plan trips to be with loved ones or give food baskets to the needy.
 - 2. However, if we had to choose one medium through which people have tried to convey love during this season we'd look no further than the greeting card.
 - a. And that's good news for the greeting card industry.
 - 1) Depending on the source, sales have been anywhere between four and seven billion dollars, annually.
 - 2) Being the most popular holiday, Christmas provides an enormous market.
 - b. From Thanksgiving Day the traffic-jammed greeting card aisle at any retailer is only rivaled by the gnarled traffic patterns outside the stores.
 - 1) The plethora of holiday greeting card choices is a sign that we're still trying to get at the heart of what psychiatrist and psychotherapist, Victor Frankl, called our "search for meaning?"
 - 2) The sales figures alone express the consumer's attempt to say and do what Frankl contended, namely, "to grasp another human being in the innermost core of his personality."
 - a) You know how difficult it is to find just the right card to convey exactly what you wish to say whether it's a birthday or anniversary or illness or whatever.
 - b) I hate buying cards because it is so difficult to find just the right one.
- C. Paul doesn't have that problem in our passage, but he is able "to grasp another human being in the innermost core of his personality."
 - 1. He begins by expressing his gratitude for the Thessalonians: "How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?"
 - 2. He goes on to say: "Here's what I hope for you in the future."
 - a. What does he hope for them in the future?
 - b. He hopes their faith increases, he hopes their love increases, and he hopes their hearts increase.

HE HOPES THEIR FAITH INCREASES, vv. 10-11

- A. Paul hopes that he may see the Thessalonians again that he may supply what is lacking in their faith, and he repeats in verse 11 his desire that the Lord might clear a way for him to come to the Thessalonians.
- B. Paul wanted to supply what was lacking in the Thessalonians' faith.
 - 1. How was the Thessalonians' faith deficient?
 - a. In a real sense, it's odd that Paul mentions that things were lacking from the Thessalonians' faith, for he praises their faith elsewhere in this epistle—E.g., "The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it" (1:8).
 - b. Yet, it seems quite certain there were particular truths which the Thessalonians had not fully grasped.
 - 1) In particular, these Christians seem to have struggled with the Second Coming.
 - a) "Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope" (4:13)—From Paul's wording, these Christians seem to have been ignorant about death and grieving like those who have no hope.
 - b) Paul makes this concern clearer in Second Thessalonians—"Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letters supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come" (2:1-2).
 - 2) The Thessalonians, then, appear to have been quite like Apollonius, knowing the way of the Lord, but still have deficiencies in their understanding.
 - 2. How would Paul supply what was lacking in the Thessalonians' faith?
 - a. He could have done so miraculously.
 - 1) Because he was an apostle, he could have bestowed upon them the miraculous measure of the Spirit.

- 2) Miraculous spiritual gifts included prophecy, which instructed the congregation—“Everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort” (1 Cor. 14:3).
 - b. Paul could also have taught the Thessalonians about what was lacking in their faith.
 - 1) We know that Paul taught congregations which he served; he taught the Thessalonians: “Brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living” (4:1).
 - 2) If as I surmise, what was lacking in the Thessalonians’ faith was their understanding of the Second Coming, Paul even instructs them on that from 4:13-5:11.
 - c. How would Paul instruct the Thessalonians?
 - 1) Personally, I think it was a both/and situation.
 - 2) The apostle instructed the congregation on proper faith and gave some of them the miraculous measure of the Spirit that they might continue instructing the congregation after his departure.
- C. What does Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonians that he might come to them and correct their deficient faith have to do with me?
- 1. On the one hand, it has nothing to do with me, for no apostle is going to tell me I’m lacking in my faith and no apostle is going to come and give me the miraculous measure of the Spirit or teach me.
 - 2. On the other hand, there are important lessons I need to learn from this:
 - a. My faith can be lacking.
 - 1) It may be that I don’t trust God as fully as I ought or it may be that, like the Thessalonians, there’s a certain point of doctrine I don’t fully grasp.
 - 2) We can all stand to grow in our faith.
 - a) “Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18).
 - b) Even Abraham’s faith took time to mature—when the Lord told him to leave his homeland and his father’s house, he took his nephew with him, and when God first told him he’d have a son in his old age, he laughed.
 - b. There’s one way for my faith to grow—to spend time in God’s word.
 - 1) However, Paul desired to supply what was lacking in the Thessalonians’ faith, it would be by the word of God—his teaching would have been inspired and the Holy Spirit would have guided his inspired teachers into all truth.
 - 2) If we want to grow, we need to spend time in God’s word.
 - a) “Faith comes by hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17).
 - b) “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation” (1 Pet. 2:2).
- D. Leonard Ravenhill tells about a group of tourists visiting a picturesque village who walked by an old man sitting beside a fence.
- 1. In a rather patronizing way, one tourist asked, “Where any great men born in this village?”
 - 2. The old man replied, “Nope, only babies.”
 - 3. So it is in our spiritual lives.
 - a. We’re not reborn as great people of faith.
 - b. But, as we spend time in Scripture we grow in faith, in love for Jesus, and in obedience to his word. Are you growing as a Christian?

HE HOPES THEIR LOVE INCREASES, v. 12

- A. Specifically, Paul writes, “May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as our does for you.”
- B. Again, the Thessalonian church was known for its love.
 - 1. “Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love. He has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us and that you long to see us, just as we also long to see you” (3:6).
 - 2. “Now about brotherly love 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 the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more” (4:9-10).
- C. There does seem to be need for growth in the Thessalonians’ love, growth evident from 4:10 where Paul writes, “We urge you, brothers, to do so more and more.”
 - 1. But, I’m not so certain that the main thrust of this verse is on brotherly love, for the Thessalonians were known for brotherly love.
 - 2. I’m convinced the thrust is found in the second admonition—“for everyone else.”
 - a. It seems from that statement that the Thessalonians were struggling with love for those outside their fellowship. They loved one another—it had room for growth as love always does—but they had solid brotherly love.
 - b. Some congregations have a tendency to be egocentric, to be concerned about themselves and not

about others.

- 1) They are more than willing to spend money to redo their auditorium, but don't ask them to give money for worldwide missions.
- 2) They are more than willing to speak to their own members, but if a stranger walks through the door, don't you dare ask them to speak.
- c. We've all been in congregations like that, haven't we? Churches so self-absorbed they had no room for those of us visiting to worship.
3. We can never be a people like that, and this congregation isn't.
 - a. Since I've been here, this church has often given money to individuals in this community who were struggling in one way or another.
 - b. It's that time of the year again to distribute our food baskets, and many of you have brought items for the pantry, others will give us names of families in need, and others will distribute those baskets.
 - c. I have several cans in my possession for Potter's Children's Home, and they'll be here this week to pick them up.
4. But, what's even more difficult for us than to love our brethren or those in need is to love our enemies.
 - a. Jesus has called us to do that very thing—"Love our enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven" (Mt. 5:44-45).
 - b. It's not easy to love that neighbor who is constantly trying to make your life difficult, is it?
 - c. It's not easy to love that co-worker who constantly stabs you in the back, is it?
 - d. It's not easy to love that fellow student who has a daily rumor about you, is it?
 - e. Yet, Jesus tells us to love such individuals—seek their best interest—and pray for them.
5. A Turkish officer raided and looted an Armenian home.
 - a. He killed the aged parents and gave the daughters to the soldiers, keeping the eldest daughter for himself.
 - 1) Some time later she escaped and trained as a nurse.
 - 2) As time passed, she found herself nursing in a ward of Turkish officers.
 - 3) One night, by the light of a lantern, she saw the face of this officer.
 - a) He was so gravely ill that without exceptional nursing he would die. The days passed, and he recovered.
 - b) One day, the doctor stood by the bed with her and said to him, "But for her devotion to you, you would be dead."
 - c) He looked at her and said, "We have met before, haven't we?"
 - d) "Yes," she said, "We have met before."
 - e) "Why didn't you kill me?" he asked.
 - f) She replied, "I am a follower of him who said 'Love you enemies.'"
 - b. How great is our love?

HE HOPES THEIR HEARTS INCREASE, v. 13

- A. Paul wrote, "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."
- B. God is able to strengthen our hearts.
 1. "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being" (Eph. 3:16).
 2. "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Phil. 4:13).
- C. But, we must not think that simply because God strengthens me that I have no say in the matter.
 1. "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (1 Cor. 10:13)—God will provide the way of escape, but I don't have to take it.
 2. Eph. 6:10-18—God will strengthen me through the armor enumerated in that text, but I have to be the one to put on the armor. If I go to fight Satan without that armor, I won't be successful.
 3. Let us increase our hearts, taking full advantage of the power of God.
- D. If we use the strength of God to withstand the attacks of Satan, we will be blameless and holy when Jesus comes with his holy ones.
 1. In other words, we will be well prepared to stand before the throne of the Almighty and hear him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."
 2. Are you taking advantage of the power of God? Are you ready to stand before his throne?