

**Text:** 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

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**Series:** 1 Thessalonians

**Title:** Maturity 101: Pray for everyone

***Three requests to pray for anybody***

v. 11-12a     Divine Enablement

v. 12           Increased Love

v. 13a           Perfected Holiness

Today we come to one of the great benedictory prayers in the Scriptures. It is a prayer of goodwill from God to believers. That God would act on our behalf and make us more like Jesus is perhaps the most common element of Christian prayers, and therefore it is not surprising to find many of these benedictory prayers throughout the Scriptures. Many of the NT letters, typically as a conclusion, have a verse or more dedicated to a prayer, or wish, for God to act favourable to the recipients of the letter. Sometimes it is a mere "May the grace of God be with you" other times it is an exultation of God's wisdom as you find at the end of Romans, or of God's power in the famous benediction-wish at the end of Jude while others, like the one we find in the middle of Eph and also here in the middle of 1 Thess, is a wish for the believers to grow in some specific spiritual way.

From ch 2:17 to ch 3:10 we found a great exposé of Paul's heart as a mature Christian. A mature Christian anticipates eagerly the fellowship of the saints. A mature Christian loves with personal sacrifice and spiritual care. A mature Christian continually invests in a pursuit of increasing maturity.

And now, in vv. 11-13, like the cherry on the cake of Christian maturity, a mature Christian prays. A mature Christian prays the kind of prayers that are so profound and insightful, and yet so basic and common, that they can be prayed for anyone. You can pray this prayer for yourself; you can pray this prayer for one another. You can pray this prayer for your missionaries; you can pray this prayer for your family. You can pray this prayer for every believer; you can pray this prayer for every unbeliever. You can pray this prayer in times of prosperity; you can pray this prayer in times of crisis. You can pray this prayer when you awake in the morning or when you fall asleep at night. You can pray this prayer as the start of your time of worship or as the close of your time of worship. You can pray this prayer anywhere; you can pray this prayer at any-time; **you can pray this prayer for any-one.**

READ 1 Thess 3:11-13.

This is a well-placed set of verses. It is the middle point of the letter, the great unifying transition from chs 1-3 and chs 4-5. This set of verses shares the encouraging tone of the first half of this letter, and it shares the topics of strong exhortation in the second half of this letter. It has the abounding love that permeates the first three chapters, and it has the call to holiness that fills the last two chapters. It speaks of the Apostolic origin of this church, and it speaks of the culmination of this church with all the saints when Jesus returns.

This set of three verses is the perfect transition between these two, almost mutually exclusive, sections in this letter. This set of three verses is the great purpose statement of the letter touching on every other verse in this letter. It serves a great literary purpose; it serves a great theological purpose; but it also serves a profoundly practical purpose —**it teaches us to pray. It teaches us how a mature Christian prays for maturity in others.**

Among all your anxiety filled burdens that you rightfully pour out to the Lord in prayer because of this lockdown, and among all your adoration filled praises that you rightfully ascribe to the Lord in prayer in spite of this lockdown, please add all your maturity-infused well-wishes for the maturity of everyone around you—for the maturity of one another at Living Hope Baptist Church, for the maturity of every spiritual brother and sister in this world, and yes, even for the salvation and spiritual maturity of the lost who do not know God at this time.

This set of three verses can be entitled: “A Prayer for Everyone / Anybody”. It is a prayer that anybody can pray, AND it is a pray that you can pray for anybody. In this prayer, we find **Three request to pray for everyone.**

This prayer, is, however, not a normal kind of prayer. v. 11 begins with “Now may our God ...”. It is what you can call an “intercessory wish-prayer.” It follows the format of OT blessings and even some of their prayers when written down. (Ps 20 is a good example of a prayer written down in this format.) “Intercessory wish-prayers” are not direct prayers to God, but they are also not mere mentions of prayers. It is not a “Lord, please do this for them” but it is also not a “I prayed that the Lord will do this for you.” An “intercessory wish-prayer” is an in-between; that combines the desires of one’s heart that would normally be prayed to God, with the associated exhortations that would be given to others based on that desire. Maybe the best way to describe this kind of intercessory wish-prayer would be to say that it is a prayer to God to do in others what you wish you could do in them, but you know you lack both the wisdom and power to do so, and so you tell them what they need to know, but you ask God to be doing it in them.

Paul's first request in this intercessory wish-prayer is the request for **Divine Enablement** (11-12a).

Remember, as Paul is writing this letter, he is absent from the believers, but longs to be with them so that he can accomplish even more spiritual work in their lives. In 3:10, the verse just before this prayer, he specifically mentions how he long to “supply what is lacking in your faith”. In 3:1-2 he says that he had sent Timothy to “establish and exhort you in your faith”. Paul is far away in Athens when he send Timothy; by the time Timothy returns, Paul has probably moved on to Corinth, even further from Thessalonica! In 2:11 Paul says he exhorted and encouraged them like a father would. And like a father hearing about his daughter sitting downtown with a flat tire, Paul wished he could transport himself to them to take care of everything. But this time he can’t. To continue the analogy of a father whose daughter is in need of help, as soon as the father climbs in his car to drive across the city to her, his car breaks down, and as many taxis as there are on the road normally, he can’t find even one when he needs it most. Calling a friend won’t work because his phone fell and broke in his rush to get the car keys. That is how it feels for Paul.

Paul did everything he could to strengthen them, but he was, after all, just a human; he knew that all too well. **That is why Paul prayed so much.** He knew that, even as an Apostle of Jesus Christ, endowed with extraordinary gifts and promises, he was still a limited, finite, human being. Both his theology and experience in life proved what he knew about God all along: We labour, but God blesses. He mentioned that already in READ 2:13.

Genesis 50 says that Man does evil, but God uses it for good. Proverbs 16 says Man plans his ways, but God directs his steps. The prophets repeatedly reminded the nation of Israel of what Moses taught them in Deut 8, that God is the one who blesses the work of your hands to bring you success. Paul knew this theology well, and after his conversion to faith in Jesus Christ, this theology kept him

sane when any other father would have gone wild for being absent from those in need.

Trusting God's plans over his own, Paul prays to God knowing that God, according to Isaiah 42, can make a blind man walk securely, and according to Mary's song in Luke ch 1, God can change the thoughts that people think. Look at how this prayer-wish, on behalf of himself and the believers, begins. READ 3:11-12a " may our God ... may the Lord ... abound in love". **Paul prays for Divine Enablement.**

Knowing that his own plans will come to nothing if God did not direct his steps, Paul prays for Divine Enablement of his own physical situation. Later he asks for Divine Enablement for the more important spiritual situation of the Thessalonians. Paul wishes prayerfully for God's Divine power to be employed for the daily physical and spiritual maturity of himself and those who he longs to serve.

Paul expresses his desire that God would see it fit to arrange the circumstantial events of his next few weeks and months in such a way that he and Timothy would be able to travel through Thessalonica. The he expressing his desire that God would see it fit to arrange the thoughts and beliefs and convictions of the saints to improve their love for one another all the more.

For now though, it is not the physical plans of Paul or the love of the saints that is the primary topic. Notice Who the primary actor in this desire for the Thessalonians is. v11: May our God and Father do it. v12: May the Lord do it! v13 again: "so that he may establish you blamelessly". Every section of these three verses begins, emphatically so, with "may God make it be"! The holiness and blamelessness of v. 13 is something you can pray for in others, because God can sovereignly make those sitting around you today more holy. The abounding type of love of v. 12 is something you can

pray for in others, because God can sovereignly make those sitting around you tonight more loving. More importantly, God can make you more holy in your lifestyle and you more loving in your expressions. God can **Divinely Enable** each of us to overcome the sins we struggle with, to despise the sins we love so much, and to imitate the daily holiness that we see in Jesus' life as we read the Gospels. **Divine Enablement**, both over your physical situation, and more importantly, over your spiritual situation is a prayer that can be prayer at every occasion, in every situation and for every believer. Eph 3:20, in the context of spiritual maturity says that God is able to do far more than we can imagine. Pray therefore for **God to enable** all of us to increase in love, grow in holiness, and endure to the end.

**Divine Enablement** is the foundation for everything else in this prayer. That is why it is the first request. Now, with our humanly efforts enabled by Divine goodness and ability, the 2nd request that you can pray for anybody is the request for **Increased Love** (12).

READ v. 12

The "Lord" refers to the the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul places both God the Father and Jesus our Lord on the same level as the recipients of this prayer. This naming convention of referring to the 1st person of the Godhead as "Father", and the 2nd person of the Godhead as "Lord" is found again in v. 13. But directing v. 12 and v. 13 to Jesus as our Lord is a not-so-subtle implication that even though these are virtues that God the Father enables us to grow in, they are virtues given to us in the context of Jesus as our Lord. IOW, God the Father enables us to grow in love, but He does so, not with an instant zap, but in the context of us submitting ourselves in obedience to Jesus Christ. To put it another way, "May the Lord Jesus exercise His Lordship over you and make you the better for it!"

It is not surprise that **Increased Love** is the first after **Divine Enablement**. This Christ-produced love that Paul is praying for is not

elaborated on in its particulars in this prayer. But, as I said earlier, this prayer is a summary of this whole book, and it is not difficult to find the particulars of Christian love. READ 4:9-12 How is that for timely instruction for the pandemic lockdown?! We increase in love when we decrease our burden on others. We increase in love when we mind our own business instead of interfering in the affairs of others. We increase in love when we do loving things and then do some more loving things.

Look also at READ 5:12-15. We increase in love when we increase in our respect of those who counsel, teach, and correct us. We increase in love when we are agreeable and peaceable. We increase in love when we come alongside each other in proportion to each person's situation. We increase in love when we do good to others even when they do evil to us.

Always be working to love one another more than you currently do. To have increasing and abounding love is to have a love that is always challenged to be more expressive. When I love you more than I feel like, and you love me more than you think you need to, then round-and-round this Christ-like love will increase to the point of abundance! If love were something visible, it should litter the street in front of our church, pour over the walls to our neighbours and billow into clouds above us. If our Lord Jesus Christ would answer prayers like this in our church, then that is exactly what would happen! Love would fill our interaction with one another and inevitably bubble over to everyone else out there too. Trust me, if you are increasing in your love for one another, then it will pour over to others too. When we are able to travel to and from church again, (let's pray for Divine Enablement that this lockdown on church gatherings can be lifted soon!), you will experience how it is much easier to be calm at the illegally overtaking taxi after expressing great love to one another at church. It is much easier to have pity for the poor and needy out there if you express your love and care to the

poor and needy in the church. It is much easier to empathise with an unsaved co-worker struggling with the effects of sin, if you spent 2 hours this week encouraging a struggling brother or sister with the good news of the Gospel. *"may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all".*

The last phrase in v. 12 *"as we do for you"* points back to everything we already say from Paul in the previous chapters. This love is NOT the superficial, always happy, nothing is wrong, everybody is right, love-imposter that the world fakes. This love is easy to define, because it has been described in great detail for us in chs 1-3. All you have to do when you get to 3:12 is to start over again at 1:1 and work your way through to 3:10, ... and then go do likewise. That will be very beneficial homework assignment for all of us! Go and review your sermon notes of the last few months. Listen to the recordings of the sermons again, but with an ear for things to imitate. If I can summarise what you will find for you, God wants us to increase in our love among one another by rejoicing in the Word of God, by reminding one another, and unbelievers, of the Gospel, by anticipating being together with Jesus one day, by being gentle and sincere in our speech, by not being a burden to each other, by not sinning against each other, by submitting to God's Word as Divine imperatives for our lives, by rejoicing in God's blessings, and by comforting each other in life's difficulties. May God enable us to grow in the same way among one another.

The last prayer request for one another comes to us in v. 13. The 3rd request that you can pray for anybody is the request for **Perfected Holiness** (13a).

READ v. 13

Now, first some grammar: The "so that" that begins v. 13 introduces a purpose clause. v. 13 is the goal or purpose for which v. 12 should happen. Stating it the other way around, v. 12 is the reason for v. 13.



In v. 12 the increase of God-like love is the issue. In v. 13 the issue is blamelessness on the day when it really matters—judgment day.

So what Paul is praying for here, is that the believers will increasingly learn to love each other **because that is the way in which they will be guaranteed safety on Judgment day**. Do you get that? If you increase in love, then you will be increasing in holiness, and if you increase in holiness, then you will be ready for Jesus' coming. Love, holiness, readiness—that is the Christian life!

When Christ returns, those who had true faith as evidenced in their love for one another will be instantly glorified and be blameless in holiness before our God and Father. But that blamelessness in holiness must already, while still on earth, be becoming a reality. That is why Paul uses the verb "establish" or "strengthen". Blamelessness at judgement day is the issue—but it is achieved by being strengthened and established in holiness now already.

When the Scriptures speak of your "heart", as we see in our verse, it refers to all of you. The Hebrew OT concept of heart, pulled into the NT by the Jewish writers, refers to the place where a person thinks, desires, and feels. We typically refers to only our feelings when we talk about our hearts, so if you add your desires and thinking patterns to it, then you know exactly what our Lord is able to strengthen for holiness. v. 13 is therefore a request for the Lord Jesus to strengthening our thoughts, desires, and feelings to be "*blamelessness in holiness*." No reason for condemnation in your thoughts. Blamelessness in your feelings. Holiness in your desires. A blameless person is a person who will be safe when judgment comes, for nothing wrong will be found in in part of him.

Blamelessness, however, does leave us with a question. Blameless in what realm? Blameless knowledge? Blameless record of how we used our time? Blameless execution of our earthly duties? What blamelessness should we pray for in one another's lives? v. 13 says

"blamelessness in holiness" Holiness – now we are on Divine turf. Only God is Holy; holiness is a God-word. It describes God's character of impeccable purity and moral uprightness. It describes God in terms of being completely different to everything and everyone else, because unlike them, he has no flaws and can do nothing wrong. Holiness is a word denoting uniqueness and purity; extraordinary-ness and spotlessness. In terms of our 3rd request, Paul is praying that the saints will be enabled to perfect their holiness.

There are some moral issues in ch 4 and 5 that were like big black spots on the otherwise admirable holiness of the Thessalonians. Paul can write a letter like this confronting the issues, but only God can actually produce the conviction and cause them to put off the sin and to put on holy virtues. We need to understand that too. Against all human odds, true believers can stop long-term sinful habits, and start new, pure, and wise habits. Christ will return one day. Then all mankind will stand, as v. 13 says, "before our God and Father." Hebrews 4:13 says: "no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account." If you are not a believer at all, your sinful heart will be exposed to God the Father, and you will have to give account of your abuses of His daily grace to you. If you are a believer, then you have been justified by Christ at your salvation, you can confidently call God your Father, but you too will stand before God Who will still exact from you an account of your growth in holiness. How will you stand? Trying to hide the spots of the sins you refused to repent of? Or will you stand joyfully as a witness to the ever-active work of Christ Who produced in you an ever-growing holiness? God is able to make you grow in holiness. Therefore, if you, or one of us, is not growing in holiness, then the problem lies with us. We absolutely must pray on behalf of one another that we will grow in holiness every day until the day of Christ's return. READ v. 13 [emphasis on last half]

Every obedience act, holy thought, and pure desire that we, through the Lord's help, do each day, is an end-time action. Christians live each day in light of eternity—specifically in light of the day that stands between this earthly life and our eternal life. Paul could stress the need for holiness in the lives of the Thessalonians because he himself lived with an imminent expectation of the coming of our Lord Jesus. This is not a verse is to grow in holiness slowly, steadily, and consistently until Jesus returns no matter how long—even though that is true too, rather Paul's point is that believers need to get their act together quickly! Jesus is coming, and then you need to be ready.

Paul prayed for **Divine Enablement, Increasing Love, and Perfected Holiness**, because the Thessalonians would have to be blameless when Jesus showed up.

Now, Jesus had not yet come. And that does not mean that we can relax in our pursuit of love and holiness—rather it means we must be all the more zealous to live holy right away.

Our Lord Jesus is coming with His Holy ones. It has been promised in the OT and the NT. It has been affirmed by Jesus' 1st coming that ended in a dramatic ascension to Heaven and a promise that He would return in the same way that he went. We tend to err on the side of thinking Jesus is not coming in our lifetime. The Thessalonians erred on the side of thinking some people have missed the Lord's coming because they died too soon. We might do well to err on that side too — so eagerly expecting Jesus to come, that we ask questions when we find a brother or sister who is not increasing in love, and who is not being established in holiness.

**The applicational question for us today is "How blameless will your holiness be if Jesus comes in an hour?"**

Paul had three specific requests that he prayed to God on behalf of the saints. He prayed for **Divine Enablement** in physical and spiritual matters. He prayed for **Increased Love** to be shown. And

he prayed for a **Perfected Holiness** in light of Jesus' imminent return.

The application for us twofold. Most obviously, learn to pray for one another like this. This is a prayer you can pray for anybody and everybody.

But also, take seriously God's will for your life— I do not mean the will of God about your future that is unknown, what I mean is the will of God about your life this day, this week. It is a will that is perfectly clear; it was alluded to here very clearly: "blameless in holiness if Jesus comes now". But let me show you how clearly God's word is spelled out in our next set of verses. READ 1 Thess 4:3a "sanctification" or "holiness." God's will for you is holiness—blamelessness in holiness.

God is Divinely Enabling you. God is Increasing your Love for one another and for all. God is making you Blameless in Holiness. Jump on board with all your heart!

In the tone of this prayer: May I selfishly implore you to pray to God that He would use His Providential wisdom and power to rearrange my life in such a way that I will learn to love all of you more, to love all unbelievers too, and to live a holy life today.

Ch 5 ends very differently to ch 3, there is a similar intercessory prayer-wish which I would like to read. It ends with perhaps the greatest theological comfort we need to live holy. READ 1 Thess 5:23-25

**AMEN**