

“Help for the Homesick: Homesick But Helpful”

1 Thessalonians 3

Dr. Jeff Reynolds

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If you grew up in the southern United States, you are probably well acquainted with the delicacy that is fried chicken. Mere mention of the dish might take you back to Sunday dinners, special moments, and a sense of nostalgia for days gone by that hopefully brings a smile to your face... and maybe a reminder that it's time to get your cholesterol checked again. We in the South know something about fried chicken, and we thank God for it. Here in Kentucky, we know all about the advent of fast food fried chicken, as our beloved Colonel Sanders took the name of our Commonwealth from a gas station in Corbin to locations all around the world. Since then, we've welcomed to our region fast food restaurant chains from Louisiana (Popeyes and Raising Canes), North Carolina (Bojangles), and Georgia (Zaxby's and Chick-Fil-A), and that's not even counting the "sit-down" restaurants where we can enjoy the dish.

With as many chicken places as we have in our area, it's pretty amazing that you probably know exactly what I'm talking about if I use the term, "The Lord's Chicken"—an unofficial moniker so granted to Chick-Fil-A because of the culture of the company. For example, I know that by talking about Chick-Fil-A on a Sunday morning, I'm likely going to induce an urge in you that cannot be fulfilled this day. If you want Chick-Fil-A on a Sunday, you're just going to have to wait, because the restaurant's founder, Truett Cathy, decided when he opened his first restaurant in 1946 that it would be closed on Sunday to allow his employees to rest and worship if they were so inclined. Cathy was seeking to establish a company that would honor the Lord, and closing on Sundays just made sense to him within that context. In fact, the corporate purpose of Chick-Fil-A, which you can access on their website, is "to glorify God by being a faithful steward of all that is entrusted to us and to have a positive influence on all who come into contact with Chick-Fil-A."

Chick-Fil-A has become known for their brand's culture. They unapologetically seek to honor the Lord, they treat people with kindness and respect, they work with excellence, and they seem to seek always to be helpful to their customers. Has it worked? Well, in 2019, Chick-Fil-A ranked as the 3rd highest-grossing restaurant chain in the nation, falling behind only McDonald's and Starbucks. In our culture of division and self-centeredness, Chick-Fil-A seems to be on to something powerful.

What Chick-Fil-A is seeking to embody as they seek "to glorify God" and "to have a positive influence" is the Christian ideal – to be helpful in Jesus' name. We who trust and follow Jesus ought to be helpful, and we ought to be a positive influence. Along with the Thessalonian Christians, we'll learn that lesson today.

Big Idea – *I'm Homesick, but in Christ, I'm helpful.*

1. I'm helpful when I put others before myself (3:1-5).

¹ Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, ² and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, ³ that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. ⁴ For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. ⁵ For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain (1 Thessalonians 3:1-5).

Think back for a moment to the events that transpired surrounding the missionaries' time in Thessalonica. In Acts 17, we learn that Paul, Silas, and Timothy entered Thessalonica where Paul reasoned in the synagogue for three sabbaths that Jesus is the Christ. Many people—Jew and Gentile, male and female—came to faith in Christ, and the church at Thessalonica was established. Very quickly, however, opposition and persecution arose from unbelieving Jews who dragged them out and accused them of sedition before the city authorities. After they were released, the brothers sent the missionaries immediately by night to Berea, where their mission work continued and another church was born.

Unfortunately, the unbelieving Jews from Thessalonica came to Berea and sought to disrupt the work of God there, too. The brothers at Berea sent Paul to Athens, but Silas and Timothy remained in Berea for some time (see Acts 17:14). They eventually joined Paul in Athens, but not for long. Paul's heart for the Thessalonian Christians compelled him to send Timothy to Thessalonica to check on the work there. He sent Silas to Macedonia (see Acts 18:5), meaning he was left in Athens alone to engage in the difficult work there. Timothy and Silas would eventually join Paul again in Corinth.

Why did Paul send Timothy back to Thessalonica? He wanted to check on his brothers and sisters in Christ, and he wanted to establish and exhort them in their faith, that they would not be moved by the afflictions they endured (1 Thessalonians 3:2-3). He wanted to ensure that the tempter would not destroy what had been established in them (1 Thessalonians 3:5), for the tempter's desire is always to steal, to kill, and to destroy (see John 10:10). Why did Paul send Timothy back to Thessalonica? Because he loved them and wanted to be sure they were okay.

Sending Timothy and Silas away was costly to Paul, though. Sending his co-laborers away meant that he was left alone in Athens—a city in no way initially friendly to the gospel message. In Athens, Paul was provoked by the presence of many idols and false gods, and he was thrust before the wisest of the wise to testify on the Areopagus regarding this strange new religion he was proclaiming. Paul could've used his brothers there with him, but he was willing to put the Thessalonian Christians' well-being before his own comfort. That's what love does. Paul was living what he would later write to the church at Philippi:

Philippians 2:3-4 - ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Paul was modeling Christ's humility and helpfulness, willing to suffer discomfort for the well-being of others. As a result, the Thessalonians were blessed. God calls us to do the same.

Questions for Reflection / Discussion:

How can you practically put others' well-being before your own comfort, thereby emulating our Lord?

2. I'm helpful when I deeply desire good for others (3:6-10).

⁶ But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you— ⁷ for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. ⁸ For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. ⁹ For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, ¹⁰ as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith? (1 Thessalonians 3:6-10).

As Paul waited for Timothy's report of how the Thessalonian Christians were doing, he was distressed. Like a parent who is away from his children but longs to know of their condition and to ensure that they are okay, Paul is eager to hear the news Timothy brings. When he hears good news, he is relieved and overjoyed, and he thanks God for His hand at work among those he so dearly loves. Paul had real affection for these brothers and sisters, and he prayed earnestly and constantly for God to bless them. He deeply and truly desired good for the Thessalonians, and his deep desire moved him to action.

We live in a self-centered world, and to some degree, we are all selfish people. Whenever friends pass from casual acquaintances to deeply committed companions, selfishness can emerge. Whenever I meet with a bride and groom for premarital counseling, I tell them that they are about to discover that they are both more selfish than they previously thought themselves to be. Whenever I meet with soon-to-be parents, I tell them that they are about to take yet another step in discovering just how selfish they really are. Why? Because being thrust into those sorts of intimate, high-investment relationships highlights the reality that there are times when you just want to do what you want to do, when you want to do it, and how you want to do it. When another person is depending on you to the degree that deep friendship, marriage, or parenting require, you just can't do things that way anymore.

Why, then, would anyone hinder their freedom by engaging a deep friendship, getting married, or becoming a parent? Because of love. Love means that, even when I'm not getting exactly what I might otherwise want, I'm okay as long as the one I love is being blessed. Love means putting others' needs before my own and being glad to do so. Love means genuinely desiring good for others, even if it means things don't go exactly my way. That's the kind of love Jesus lived.

Jesus said, "Greater love has no one that this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Paul instructs husbands to love their wives "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). Of course, both of these passages refer to Jesus' ultimate act of love and self-sacrifice: His death on the cross for us. But these passages also speak to a broader reality to the love of Christ—that is, He laid down His comfort, His well-being, His privilege, and His own desires for the good of others. He genuinely desired good for His disciples, so He laid down his life. He laid down His life by living for others, and He laid down His life by dying for others.

You may be presented with the opportunity to give your life for another in some sort of tragic situation, but chances are much better that you will have the opportunity to lay down your comfort, your well-being, your privilege, or your own desires for others. If you love them as Christ loves you and deeply desire good for them, you'll be much more ready to be helpful to them.

Questions for Reflection / Discussion:

How can you practically show your love for others today? What small steps might show love in a big way?

3. I'm helpful when I pray (3:11-13).

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, ¹² and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, ¹³ so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints (1 Thessalonians 3:11-13).

Paul finishes this section of his letter to his beloved Thessalonian Christians by offering a prayer for them. He asks God to hasten his coming to visit them, and in the meantime, he asks that the Lord would cause them to grow in their love for one another and for everyone—that their hearts would be established blameless in holiness before God in light of the Second Coming of Christ. In other words, Paul loves these brothers and sisters in Christ, and he intercedes in prayer on their behalf to God. There is nothing more impactful we can do.

Prayer is foundational in the lives of those who trust and follow Jesus. God welcomes us to His throne (see Hebrews 4:16), beckoning us to cast upon Him all our anxieties (see 1 Peter 5:7) and to come to Him with everything (see Philippians 4:4-7). God the Son and God the Holy Spirit even intercede for us (see Romans 8:34 and 8:26-27, respectively), praying for us with “groanings too deep for words” (Romans 8:26) as “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28 NASB). Furthermore, we know that God calls us to pray for one another, as Paul instructed Timothy, saying, “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people” (1 Timothy 2:1). The most impactful thing we can do for another person is to pray for them.

Christian musician Stephen Curtis Chapman captured this truth vividly in 2001 with his song entitled “Carry You To Jesus.” His deeply impactful song reminds us of the incredible power of prayer for others.

*I will not pretend to feel the pain you're going through / I know I cannot comprehend the hurt you've known
And I used to think it mattered if I understood / But now I just don't know*

*Well, I'll admit sometimes I still wish I knew what to say / And I keep looking for a way to fix it all
But we know we're at the mercy of God's higher ways / And our ways are so small*

But I will carry you to Jesus / He is everything you need / I will carry you to Jesus on my knees
[You can listen to the song here: <https://youtu.be/RLE2XKa2Evv>]

We cannot know everyone’s pain (and shouldn’t pretend that we do). We cannot understand what people are experiencing. We can’t always know what to say, and we can’t always fix things for those we love. But what we can do—what we *must* do—is carry them to Jesus on our knees. We lovingly take them to the One who knows them better than anyone, the One who loves them more than we can imagine, and the One who can truly do something about their situation. We are most helpful to others when we are first prayerful for them, for we are carrying them to the One “who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think” (Ephesians 3:20).

Questions for Reflection / Discussion:

Have you ever viewed prayer as being somehow “less than” other forms of helping people? Of course prayer shouldn’t replace more tangible expressions of service, but it should precede and empower those acts of service. Don’t be afraid to let people know you’re praying for them, or even to pray *with* them.

Final Thought

Creating and living in a culture of helpfulness is not just beneficial in business, it's beneficial in life. Obeying God's call to put others before ourselves, to legitimately desire good for others, and to pray for others sets followers of Christ apart from the rest of the world. When we seek to be helpful, we truly become blessings to the people God strategically places in our path.

At the time of this writing, the United States of America is sharply divided over many issues. We continue to face a deadly pandemic that is now entering its ninth month of major impact in our country. We continue to grapple with racial tensions, and we deal with profoundly deep political divisions in our country. We are just days away from a hotly contested presidential election and important elections at every level of government. The tension in our world is very real, and it isn't going anywhere anytime soon.

For those of us who trust and follow Jesus, what are we to do? We are to be helpful. We are to put others before ourselves, we are to genuinely desire good for our neighbors, and we are to pray. We are to be the body of Christ, the hands and feet of Jesus, who usher in heavenly reality into our earthly moment. Of course we need to engage in helping find solutions for our problems at the local, regional, national, and even international levels, but I'm convinced that the very best thing for us each to do is to be helpful at the personal level. How can you personally make a positive impact in somebody's life today? How can you love your neighbor, not just in word, but in deed? Ask God to direct you to someone, and expect Him to answer your prayer. In the power of the Holy Spirit and in the name of Jesus, let's go be helpful today!