

Please, Stop Trying to Be Nice
1 Thessalonians 3:11-13
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1 Thessalonians 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.

This passage reminds me of a wedding toast. It as if Paul is raising a glass and saying, “now, may God the Father and His Son bless you in love!” The language used in verse 12:

12 and may the Lord make you *increase* and *abound* in love for one another and for all, as we do for you,

The word Paul chooses for “increase” is hard to translate into English. If I were the translator, I would have translated it like this, “May the Lord make you gain so much that you don’t know what to do with yourself!” The word translated increase means “Way too much.” It is a word used in ancient Greek to express thoughts like, “you should have stopped long ago.” This word conveys opulence, over indulging in abundance. Then, if that is not enough, Paul adds “and abound.” This word means that you have all you need and some more too. This is lofty language. This is not the kind of words that one reads in a monotone voice! This is why this makes me think of a wedding toast. “Here, here! Listen up! And now, may this couple be so blessed by God with joy and love and peace that they overflow to all people they know, and their love cascades down through the generations!” What is the substance of this blessing?

Paul is calling on the church to overflow in love for one another. Love one another. It is the ancient Christian mandate that came first from the Word of Jesus at the Last Supper. We are to be a community of love between the members. This is to be our mark. Now, this blessing of love continues on in verse 13:

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.

In this lofty blessing that begins with abounding love, moves on towards blamelessness and holiness. The blessing of love has the effect of moving us to holiness. This might be surprising to us. I think that when we think of holiness, we think we access it by following rules. When we speak of holiness, we speak of the sins we ought not to be doing and the good deed we should be doing. When we speak of holiness, we think of the life of the mind, of times of prayer, of setting our mind on Godly things and not sinful things, on heaven, not earth. It is so easy to think of holiness as achieved by discipline and controlled conduct.

But the Bible here says that holiness is not achieved through rules and discipline. Rather

it is achieved through love. This should be a revelation to us, because often we set love and holiness against each other, as two separate aspects of our Christian life. Frankly, I preach so much on love that I have often been questioned as to whether or not I care at all about holiness. As if somehow love and holiness are disconnected and must be worked on separately. However, Paul blesses these folks by saying, in effect, “if you overflow in love, you will stand blameless and holy at the coming of Jesus.”

One more truth we should note on our examination of this text: this blessing doesn't depend on the people being blessed, but on God. Look what it says:

may *the Lord* make you increase . . . that *He* may establish your hearts blameless in holiness

Who is the subject of the action in this text? Who does the work? God does. I am a bit surprised by this. Instead of “may you abound in love and may you live holy lives” Paul says, “May the Lord do it.” God is the agent of increase in love and He is the one who establishes our hearts as blameless. When the final day comes, and we stand before the Lord, according to the Bible, Jesus will get the credit for every bit of our love and blamelessness. Now, I'd like to use the rest of our time by examining two practical questions that this text presents to us.

Two questions

1. What is the relationship between love and holiness?
2. How do we access this blessing if God is the One who must do it?

If love leads to holiness, how does that work? Also, if God is the One who blesses us with love and holiness, what must we do to access this blessing then what is our part? Let's take those questions in order.

1. What is the relationship between love and holiness?

The connection between love and holiness needs to be obvious to you and everyone who loves Jesus. There are cultural reasons why we get confused on this I believe. For example, I think we define love as being nice and holiness as being good. Neither definition is sufficient. Love is not about being nice. Your mother and your teacher told you to be nice, but God never did. There is no command in the Bible, in Hebrew, Greek, nor any of the best English translations (kjv, nas, niv, esv, new living) that ever equates love and niceness. Why? Because nice means, by definition, “don't ever do anything to me I don't like and only say words I don't mind hearing.” What has that got to do with love? We live in a society that equates love with being nice too often. We live in a society that is afraid to punish criminals, or hold anyone accountable for their actions because it isn't nice. But nice has nothing to do with love. People who hate you can be very nice to you.

Love is so married to truth that it can't afford to be nice. The Bible describes love as dangerous, and nice is never dangerous. The Bible says the ultimate picture of love is a very not nice picture of the Son of God hanging beaten on a tree. The Bible says things like “The wounds of a friend are faithful.” Well, let me tell you, as one who has received such wounds many times, they might be faithful, but they are not nice. Love is dangerous. Why? Because love always seeks what is best for the other and finds its joy in doing so.

As for holiness, Christians are often the worst at defining this. We say to the world that we are holy because we don't do the sins you do. Now it is true that holiness avoids sin. But the most unholy sin, the root of all sin, is pride. And though we don't say it, what we call holiness often amounts only to pride. "We aren't like those other Christians who go to movies, or sip wine, or read versions of the Bible not authorized by the king. We are holy." Holiness does avoid sin, but it views the sins of other with compassion and tears for itself. The holy man sees others sins and says to himself, "That's me, right there. I am that sinner. I am that drunken guy. I am that promiscuous woman. I am that thief. I am that brawler. I am that abuser." He realizes his sin, and realizes that God has plucked him from the same fire and from the hell and destruction that follows. And now, he looks on other sinners and says, "I cannot join you in that sin, for it won't be good for you. Instead, I'll pray for you, weep for you, and love you towards repentance."

My brother and sisters, if we could always look at the sinners who we tend to think the worst and see ourselves; we will be a step closer to holiness. Let's look at the connection between holiness and love from the Bible:

Romans 13:8-10 8 Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. 9 For this, "YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET," and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

Love and holiness not only are not opposed, they cannot be separated. You cannot do one without the other. You cannot be holy apart from love, because love fulfills the Law and righteousness of God. Doing right is always the kindest thing, the most loving and affectionate thing, you can do for someone. If I sleep with another man's wife, do I love him? No. So then what would love do? Furthermore, think about the ethics of our world. Let's look at sex as an example. People sleep with people that they are not married to as a matter of course. People in this room sleep with those they are not married to. "What is the harm in that if we love one another?" The harm is that it is unholy. God has made sex not merely a physical act, but a spiritual one. Sex involves the body, the emotions, and the mind, and the spirit. Therefore, when you sleep with someone outside of marriage, what you call an act of love is really an act of hate. You are hating the person you sleep with, and harming them. "But it feels nice, not mean." Love is not nice. It is dangerous, ferocious, strong, kind, merciful, and generous. But it is never nice.

I want you to notice a difference between God's definition of holiness and ours. Our holiness can be achieved on its own, but God's requires community. When we think of holiness, we can have the image of the monk who locks himself away in a monastery cell, and meditates all day and avoids sinful thoughts, words and deeds. We think of him as holier than the rest of us. Likewise, people think that holiness is a private matter that they can do alone. Wrong. Holiness exalts God's law and righteous standard. The key to the law being fulfilled is love. Love cannot

be done alone. Christianity is not a private faith. It is not the deeper inner conviction one has in the quiet moments of his life that he shares with only a person or two or no one at all. (This is the faith of politicians.). It demands community.

2. How do we access this blessing if God is the One who must do it?

Paul's blessing on the Thessalonians required God to do all the heavy lifting. He asked that God would make them abound in so much love that they were silly with it. He asked God to be the One who made them such a community of love that holiness rolled out.

The Bible teaches that living the Christian life is impossibility by ourselves. We are not capable of doing what we are called to do, by ourselves. "The thing I want to do, I do not do –I do the very thing I don't want to do!" Why is that? Why can't we love like the Bible calls us to? The answer is that you can't require an animal to act against its own nature. I'm always amazed at people who think they can get animals to act against their own nature. They so want a relationship with an animal that they think they are humans and can act like us. There are people who have found baby raccoons who they have raised as if they were puppies. At first, it's all good. One day, the raccoon grows up and attacks its owner. I've had friends who've own rats as pets. Oh, they're great pets, they tell me. But then they bite someone. "Bad rat." Hey, that's what rats do. There's the guy who thought he understood the souls of bears and could co-exist with them. So the bears ate him. End of story.

The nature of a man is to sin. So when we are required to live a holy and loving life, it isn't in us. We don't have the power. So if God doesn't do the loving, then we won't love. We can't; even if we want to. But we must not make the mistake of thinking that we are not to try. This is lie and a sin. We are to try to do the impossible every single day. We are to try to love enemies, deny self, enjoy the success of others, serve others happily, submit to others daily and all these other things that we can't do. We are to try to do the impossible daily. Someone might ask this question: why would God want me to try the impossible? Because He likes to watch you fail? No. He wants us to try so that we can see His power. Our faith is supernatural. We only stop seeing that when we stop trying to do the impossible.

Why should you work on your marriage when there is no earthly hope? Because there is no earthly hope! Why should you keep trying to quit that awful habit that is ruining so many people's lives, that has you so bound in chains that you can never be free? Because you are so bound that you can never be free! Why should you seek to love that person of whom you heart has said, "I can never feel kindness or joy toward that person?" Because your heart says you can't do it.

Only when you seek to do what you cannot do can you see God's power. Why try the impossible daily? We try so that we can do the impossible daily, by the power of God. My loving others is not possible because it is not easy. My laying down selfish ambition, competitive pride, endless longing to be served, commitment to my own comfort; those things I cannot do. But, I do it anyway. Why? Because "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

The Christian life is "Christ in you, the hope of glory." The strength to do right is in you, if God is in you. The power to love in dangerous ways is in you. When you say, "I can't" and then you don't try, you are not being humble. You are being faithless and unholy. You do not

love God and you do not love man. That is why Christianity is not for cowards. It is for people willing to believe the impossible is possible, in their own lives, every day. This dynamic I want to share with you in two texts. Both of these are worth committing to memory for they are seminal for the foundation of the Christian life.

Galatians 2:20 20 "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.

The Bible teaches that when you turned from sin to believe on Christ that you shared in His death on the cross. You, who can't live holy, who can't love, died. But now, in you, lives Christ. When you feel like you can't love, and you feel can't obey, what should you do? Don't believe your feelings, believe God who says that Christ lives in you, and attempt the impossible.

Philippians 2:12-13 12 So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; 13 for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.

This instruction sums up our daily Christian walk. "Work out" your salvation means your effort. It is a lie of the devil that says, "If God does it, you don't have to do anything." No, you must do what God has called even if you are not capable. You must work at it, daily, with all your strength. But look, God is at work in you, to do two things; One He makes you will or "want" what He wants. Two, He then makes you do the work. He empowers both. Why does he empower both? He empowers both for His good pleasure. He takes pleasure in your successful living. I want to share with you some of the words of Jesus that chill me to the bone, and motivate me. Speaking of the end times, Jesus said this:

Matthew 24:10-13 10 "At that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another. 11 "Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many. 12 "Because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. 13 "But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved.

I think there is a good chance that we are living in the end times, and that I am called to preach God's word to God's people at the end times. In hard times, people look to themselves. When law breaks down, people become brutal. In the end times, there will be many who are in churches that will stop loving, and their members will become brutes towards their own brothers and sisters in order to protect and hoard their life on this earth. This chills me. O Lord, let it not be here. Let it not be so among us. Let us abound to overflowing in our love for one another, with so much love; we don't know what to do with the excess. Let us endure to the end.