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Treasures in the Kingdom, Part 5

On YouTube there is a video of an amazing dessert. A platter with a large chocolate ball sitting on top of the tray is what the waiter brings to the table. The first impression is that this is the dessert! But then the waiter proceeds to pour hot liquid chocolate on top of the ball which after some time melts away to reveal a more incredible dessert inside! At first glance, the chocolate ball appears to be the prize, but it is not! The dessert is something far better, more exquisite, and much tastier!

1 Thessalonians 3 yields that kind of surprise. Most of us believe that Christian maturation consists primarily of these elements:

- The Mastery of Scripture.
- Religious activity.

- Meekness.
- And other such things.

However, Paul reveals to us that while Christian maturation involves these things it involves four more fundamental elements! As you know, 1 Thessalonians 3 was written to explain the impact of highly valuing God's people:

1 Thessalonians 2:20-3:1a, "For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? For you are our glory and joy. Therefore..."

From this we conclude that this chapter is NOT so much a calling as to how we ought to live (although it most certainly is that); it RATHER is a description of what our future will look like as we grow in Christ! When the "mind of Christ" drives us

- That for which we will sacrifice will be the people of God.
- We are going to be hurt (cf. John 2:24). And so like Timothy, we will need to be ones who (v. 2a): (1) Rely exclusively on the gospel, (2) Actively strive to co-labor with God in His Kingdom purpose, and (3) Labor to hasten the coming of Christ's Kingdom in our lives and in the lives of those around us!
- The focus of your life and ministry will include the engendering and/or strengthening the faith of another individual (vv. 2b, 5b, 8b)!
- A major concern as it relates to the child of God is that the pain and heartache of this life won't discourage the Christian. But gazing upon the greatness and goodness of God, the believer grows strong in his faith looking for the reward (vv. 3-4)!
- That which you will consider to be a crisis will shift from you, your life, and the temporal things of this age, to any and every danger when it comes to a person's soul (v. 5)!

In this regard, notice sixthly that when God's people are your treasure, that for which you will labor when it comes to God's people will revolve around four specific fruits (N.B., this is what a mature Christian will labor for when it comes to their spouse, children, friends, family, etc.).

1 Thessalonians 3:6, "But now that Timothy has come to us from you [the implication here is that Timothy has just arrived when Paul wrote this], and has brought us good news of your (1) faith and (2) love, and that you (3) always think kindly of us, (4) longing to see us just as we also long to see you."

That this represents Paul's list of what constitutes Christian maturation is seen in his rather shocking choice of words, "good news"! Recall that Paul ministered in Thessalonica for about six weeks, not enough time to make solid disciples of the Lord!

Think of it! Paul was in Rome for two years ministering to the saints that came to him in his imprisonment. He was in Ephesus for three years! Timothy joined him on his second missionary journey and continued to receive instruction from him for another thirteen years! When we think of establishing a person or a church, that's what comes to mind, not just six weeks!

Yet that was how long Paul was with the Thessalonian believers when the Jews of Thessalonica chased him not only out of Thessalonica, but out of Berea as well! And so Paul left Thessalonica feeling like he had abandoned this young church in their hour of need!

So Paul immediately endeavored to go back to these believers, but Satan thwarted him at every turn (1 Thessalonians 2:18). Accordingly, the apostle sent Timothy in his stead to minister to these young Christians. Timothy went to Thessalonica, ministered, and then returned with an amazing report, not only were the Thessalonians still serving Christ, they in fact were thriving in their faith!

In response to this incredible news, Paul wrote this epistle!

1 Thessalonians 3 is the heart of Paul's message to these believers AND our verse again contains an indication of what Paul as an Apostle valued most in a maturing Christian! Look at the verse again:

1 Thessalonians 3:6, "but now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news."

Do you see the two words, "good news"? The word Paul used here in the Greek is THE word used throughout the New Testament in reference to the good news of Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection- εὐαγγελίζω (*euaggelizō*)! Paul's use here is unprecedented! Leon Morris wrote of this:

[This] shows how remarkably Paul had been affected by Timothy's news. This seems to be the only place in the New Testament where the word is used of any other news than God's saving work. (Morris, 2009, p. 72)

Do you see it? For Paul to use this expression of anything other than the "Good News" of Christ and His Kingdom tells us NOT that Paul was being flippant here, BUT that what Timothy reported had to have been a "bull's eye" when it came to the Thessalonian's faith, growth, and maturation!

So what specifically is the fruit which evoked such a response in Paul when he thought of the Thessalonians? What are the essential marks of Christian maturation? What ought to be our focus and goal in ministry when it comes to God's people? Notice it was

fourfold; the first being their faith.

1 Thessalonians 3:6a, “But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of YOUR FAITH...”

We talked about this in connection to verse 5. Why is it that Paul sent Timothy to Thessalonica?

1 Thessalonians 3:5, “For this reason, when I could endure *it* no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you...”

As we have seen, this is a major issue when it comes to a Christian’s walk with Christ. In fact, Paul is going to return to this again in vv. 7-8, 10!

“Faith” is such a big deal because the focus of Satan’s attack against Adam and Eve was their trust/reliance upon God! God had given them a command; would they take God at His word? The answer was NO! Satan successfully relegated God’s word to a hypothesis which now became subject to Adam’s valuation. And that same temptation continues to be THE issue for mankind.

- God’s word says... but my peers say!
- God’s word says... but my teachers say!
- God’s word says... but my experience says!
- God’s word says... but my flesh says!
- God’s word says... but public opinion says!
- God’s word says... but the scholar says!

Christian, when life gets difficult and hard — and it will — will you “...live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4)? Or will you live by YOUR FINITE, LIMITED, and SIN-FILLED EVALUATION of God, His Kingdom, and reality?

Sadly, persecution and hardship have a way of dislodging our trust in God. Satan, yea our flesh, is pleased to judge God by feeble sense! Yet maturation says, *“Be gone oh way-word thoughts which raise doubts in my mind about the goodness and truthfulness of God. God has spoken in His word! That was enough for Christ (Matthew 4:4, 7, 10)! That is enough for me!”*

Christian, you must see that this is THE battle ground when it comes to...

- Life in this world as a Christian.
- The raising up of godly children.
- Our marriages.
- How we work and play.

- Everything!

Will your thought, goals, and conduct be governed by YOUR agenda/will or by GOD'S?

Christian maturation says, "God said it that settles it!"

- God said that He is good... therefore no tragedy will persuade me to hold any other view!
- God said that it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35) ... therefore I will spend my life giving of my time, resources and strength for the welfare of Christ and His Kingdom.
- God said that my best is NOT in getting what I want, BUT in the giving up of my rights (Luke 9:23-25)... therefore my best in marriage is NOT getting from my spouse, BUT laying my life down for them!

Notice a second characteristic of Christian maturation is the Christian's love.

1 Thessalonians 3:6b, "But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith AND LOVE..."

Galatians 5:6, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love."

Paul said it again here! That which is most essential is "faith working through LOVE!"

This is exactly what we see here; and it is very important! John Calvin said that "[Faith and love] are the sum of godliness." As we've already looked at "faith," WHAT IS "LOVE"? Is it a feeling? A warm fuzzy? An emotion?

John 3:16a, "For God so loved the world [the sin-filled, wretched world in rebellion against Him], that He gave His only begotten Son..."

From this passage we see that "love"- Biblical love has at least four elements to it.

- It first is NOT a feeling. God wasn't moved emotionally when He viewed the sin-filled world to which He would send His Son!
- Secondly, it is NOT merited. The world did nothing to warrant the sending of God's Son. In fact, the only thing the world merited up to this point was "death" (Romans 6:23)!
- Thirdly and positively, Biblical Love IS a determined act of the will. Because the world was helplessly bound by sin and therefore worthy of death/hell, God deigned to deliver! It pleased the Lord so to do (cf. Ephesians 1:5)!
- Fourthly, Biblical Love IS sacrificial. Because "God so loved the world, He

gave..." - He sacrificed- "...His only begotten Son!"

Combined we understand that Biblical love is not a feeling but a determined act of will which results in determined acts of self-giving for people who are not worthy. Accordingly, whenever Biblical love is identified, that which is in focus is NOT our feelings, BUT selfless acts of sacrifice!

And it is that secondly that moved Paul to great rejoicing when it came to the Thessalonians. When Paul gazed upon the Thessalonians that which blew his mind was their sacrifice for the Lord! For example, when the city of Thessalonica was in turmoil and the lives of Paul and his companions were threatened, what do we read?

Acts 17:10a, "And the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea..."

We don't see complaints or the placing of blame! Yes, their lives were made extremely difficult *because of Paul*, yet the Thessalonians were willing to receive it all from the hand of the Lord! And so rather than betray Paul, the Thessalonians sent him away under the cover of darkness! That's sacrifice and that is love!

When Paul came to Berea and beyond, he was greeted with men and women who already had heard of the gospel of Christ (1 Thessalonians 1:8)! How was this so? Though their world was falling apart and many were imprisoned and threatened, the Thessalonians didn't sit around feeling sorry for themselves. Rather, they gave themselves to the Lord and so spread the news of His Kingdom! Again, that is sacrifice; that is love!

When Paul was in Corinth, just a couple of months later, you know what the Thessalonians did (among others)? Though they had meager resources nevertheless they sent Paul money to distribute to hurting Christians on account of a drought that had overtaken the Mediterranean at the time.

2 Corinthians 8:1-4, "Now, brethren, we *wish to* make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia [that would the church in Philippi and the church in Thessalonica], that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability *they gave* of their own accord, begging us with much entreaty for the favor of participation in the support of the saints..."

Family of God again note their Sacrifice and so their love! And family of God, this must be us as well!

2 Corinthians 5:14-15, "[The Principle] For the love of Christ controls us, [The

Example] having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; [The Exhortation] and He died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.”

What is it that stuck out about the Thessalonians for which Paul responded in extreme praise to the Lord? Their self-sacrificing love! They gave themselves to the Lord unto the benefit and growth of others! That is the fruit we look for in ministry! Notice a third characteristic is their fidelity or loyalty.

1 Thessalonians 3:6c, “But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love, AND THAT YOU ALWAYS THINK KINDLY OF US...”-

On the surface, this sounds as though Paul here is thankful that his reputation remained intact in Thessalonica. In fact, the NIV translates this, speaking of Timothy, “...he has told us that you always have pleasant memories of us...” Gordon Fee wrote of this:

[The translation of the NIV is] one that probably leads the reader slightly astray here. ‘Pleasant memories’ have to do with good friendships, family gatherings, good times together, and the like; this word has to do with the fact that their memory of Paul is a good one, not clouded with doubts and misgivings... (Morris, 2009, p. 123)

You have to understand; Paul really didn’t care what men thought about him (1 Corinthians 4:3). He was a “gospel man” (Romans 1:1) whose greatest concern was the reputation of Christ and the progress of His kingdom. It therefore would be amazing that he should be moved personally by the opinion of man, be it good or bad!

So what does Paul mean here? To answer this, we have to understand the bigger context. Recall that one of the primary forms of attack that the Jews used in addressing the conversion of the Thessalonian Jews was to slander Paul. If you are going to dissuade someone from following the teaching of another, typically you attack the man, his message, or both! That is what the Jews of Thessalonica did here. As it related to Paul, they charged him with egregious sin, specifically:

- That he was a fly-by-night “pleader with a cause” who was after one thing: money! Recall that during Paul’s stay in Thessalonica he received financial support from the Philippians “more than once” (Philippians 4:16)! The Jews would have known this and so used it as proof for their accusation (cf. 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12)!
- That he was perverse and therefore took advantage of the women in Thessalonica in the name of religion. I did not stress it at all when we examined 1 Thessalonians 2, but Paul’s defense of his person invoked language that was fraught with sexual connotation. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 2:3 Paul said

that his “exhortation did not come from... impurity”! In the Bible this primarily refers to sexual uncleanness.

Of this word and the accusation leveled against Paul by the Thessalonian Jews, MacArthur wrote:

In Paul’s day many of the mystery religions and Greek cults practiced and even exalted sexual perversion. Those religions were very popular because in most of them the primary religious experience centered on the cult adherents having [relations] with a ritual temple prostitute or the cult leader. Temple orgies were not uncommon. Sexual intercourse had such a central role in those pagan religions because the members believed that when one had [relations] with a male leader or female prostitute- those supposedly closest to the gods- the individual connected with the deities. Therefore, through fornication they supposedly achieved some sort of mystical or metaphysical union with the gods. Thus wicked, unscrupulous leaders would seek converts for the purpose of having [relations] with them. ¶ So it was typical for religious charlatans to enter a locale and seek women for personal... satisfaction under the pretext of offering them a deeper, more complete, more intimate religious experience. Those unscrupulous teachers even enlisted women to pass those ‘religious experiences’ on to other men. (Dr. John MacArthur, 2002, p. 37)

Clearly Paul was being accused of such wretchedness on the part of the Jews! These were just some of the slanderous things said about Paul and his companions when they left Thessalonica.

Now if the Thessalonians believed this about Paul, what would have happened to their commitment to Christ? It easily could have been abandoned! Speaking of the Jews Paul wrote:

Romans 2:24, “For “the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”

Such was the concern of Paul when it came to the Christian in Corinth:

2 Corinthians 6:1, 3, “And working together *with Him*, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain... giving no cause for offense in anything, in order that the ministry be not discredited.”

That’s the concern here! The Thessalonian Jews said, “*You’ve been duped by a wicked, fly-by-night televangelist interested in primarily two things! Wake up and think!*” Accordingly, in 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12 Paul defended his character quite strongly using again and again and important expression, “you yourself know” (2:1, 2, 5, 9, 10, 11)!

Now based on Timothy's testimony here, the Thessalonians did NOT believe this about Paul. Rather they believed that he was a man of integrity, above reproach, and so one worthy to be followed (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:1)! As this was so, that meant that the Thessalonians wouldn't reject the message of Christ on account of the messenger, BUT RATHER WOULD REMAIN FAITHFUL TO THE LORD! And that is the key here and so the third element of their Christian Maturation!

From this we behold another mark of Christian maturation: Fidelity to Christ! In fact, listen to Paul's exhortation to the Ephesians:

Ephesians 4:14, "As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming."

Christian maturation thirdly involves fidelity to the Lord! Notice lastly the mature Christian's passion.

1 Thessalonians 3:6d, "But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you."

What was involved in Paul longing to see God's people?

Romans 1:11-12, "¹¹ For I long to see you IN ORDER THAT I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established [truly you must see that Paul's words here weren't an extension of some latent nostalgia. Paul wanted to see the Romans that together they might be encouraged to serve the Lord! He continued...] ¹² that is, that I may be encouraged together with you *while* among you, each of us by the other's faith, both yours and mine."-

We see the same in Paul's passion for the Thessalonians. Paul wrote this earlier:

1 Thessalonians 2:8, "Having thus a fond affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God BUT OUR VERY OWN LIVES, because you had become very dear to us."

In Scripture, if you have strong affection for someone, you will want to minister to them and so encourage them in their faith! That's the passion of Christian maturation! In fact, it couldn't be any clearer than this:

1 Thessalonians 3:10, "As we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith."

From all of this we conclude that Paul longed to see the Thessalonians that he might

encourage them in the faith! And such was the passion of the Thessalonians when it came to Paul speaking of the Thessalonians and their monetary gifts:

2 Corinthians 8:3-5, “For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability *they gave* of their own accord, begging us with much entreaty for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, and *this*, not as we had expected, BUT THEY FIRST GAVE THEMSELVES TO THE LORD AND TO US BY THE WILL OF GOD.”

One of THE things that stood out to Paul about the Christians in Macedonia (which again would have included the Philippians as well as the Thessalonians) was their desire to minister to Paul! They wanted to see him encouraged! They wanted God’s best for him. They truly were passionate about his progress and growth in grace!

This is the idea behind the language of “longing to see you” in Scripture. Paul longed to see others NOT simply to say “Hi!” He longed to see them that Kingdom Ministry might take place! So what is it that ought to blow your socks off when it comes to the people to whom you are ministering? What ought to be your goal in parenting, marriage, discipleship, and body life? When John said:

3 John 4, “I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.”

What specifically would “walking in the truth” look like? Nothing less than people growing in their faith, love, fidelity to the Lord, and their passion to serve the Lord and His people! That is The fruit we want to see when it comes to Christian maturation!

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