

1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

Intro June 24, 2007 Laboring Love

A Chihuahua, a German Shepherd and a Bulldog, are in a doggie bar having a drink when a good-looking female Collie comes up to them and says, "Whoever can use the words liver and cheese, in the same sentence can have me."

So the German Shepherd says, "Ya, I love liver and cheese."

The female Collie says, "That's not good enough."

The Bulldog says, "I hate liver and cheese."

She says, "That's not creative."

Finally, the Chihuahua says, "Liver alone -- cheese mine."

Confidence. The Chihuahua had it, most of us don't. In relationships, many of us teeter on the edge, envying those with the self confidence to go far, while we wallow in the corner. But what often is confidence is a mask covering insecurity.

Comedian Joan Rivers exudes confidence. At 74 she's had numerous cosmetic surgeries. Since 1965 she's had bags removed from under her eyes, two complete face-lifts, cheek implants, fat injections, brow smoothing, teeth capping, neck tightening, a tummy tuck, and a nose-thinning.

As to her obsession with her appearance, she said,

"When you look better, you're treated differently. People want to be around attractive people."

As to the fact that a lot of people make fun of her for her many cosmetic surgeries, she says,

"They cannot parody you unless they know you, and when they know you, it means you're part of the culture, and when you're part of the culture, it means you're successful."

What a contrast to the Christian understanding of what it means to be attractive, of why we want to be around people, and of what it means to be successful. Rivers' worldview is based completely on outward appearances and a profound personal insecurity.¹

Confidence in how we relate to one another can not be faked and should not be ignored. Confidence though begins not with the self assertion of personal ability, but flows out of one's standing before God. If you have confidence with God, you will be confident with others. Our passage shows us that a confident relationship with God is best seen in how we relate to others, as we relate to them in love.

If we are to have confidence before God, we must love others. READ 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13.

In this brief prayer, Paul makes two requests that produce a result. But it is more than his expressing a desire to see his friends; rather this prayer should be our prayer as we want to be confident when we stand before our God in the last judgment. Confidence flows when love for others is communal, continual, and conforming.

OUR LOVE FOR OTHERS IS TO BE COMMUNAL v11

Communal love is shared by the Godhead

Paul opens his prayer with what at first glance may appear to be a simple address to God, but it is more than just a formula, Paul's words speak volumes. 1 Thessalonians is Paul's first letter, written around AD 50, yet it evidences a clear understanding of the deity of Christ. His prayer is addressed to our God and Father and our Lord Jesus, placing the two on equal footing.

To us it may not seem odd, but to a good Jew in the first century to make such a connection is either an earth shattering revelation or heresy. If you have read or been told that Trinitarian theism was a late fourth century development, this simple statement shows that is in error.

Defying grammatical convention, Paul uses a singular verb to refer to the action of the Father and Jesus, pointing to the unity of essence. He calls on Jesus, as Lord, a term reserved for God to sovereignly guide his steps. But I don't think his reason is merely a theological statement, but his theology shapes the way he views others.

Bringing Father and Son together in this prayer pictures what love looks like. As Paul desires God to work in his life to serve this young church, he addresses both Father and Son for a reason.

It is familial, relational, communal. The reason we speak of God as one in essence and yet three persons is not an abstract idea meant to give us a headache, but to show the pattern we are to follow. We were created by a relational God, a being who for eternity past has existed as a family. There is a bond far exceeding any friendship, there is a connection between them.

What does that mean for us? How does this complex theological idea affect the way we live?

Andrew Murray, the great South African pastor, once said: "My relationship with God is part of my relationship with men. Failure in one will cause failure with the other."² This truth is

evidenced in what Paul prays for first. The communal love in the Godhead is the paradigm for our relationship with one another. To know how God relates within Himself teaches us how we are to relate to one another.

Communal love is shared by the Body

Paul's prayer is that the Godhead direct his way to the Thessalonians. The motivating reason for his coming, as he stated in the previous verse, is to supply what they now lack (v10).

The assumption here is that as Christians we need each other. The Christian life is not a solo affair. For our love to be expressed in our community, in our church, it takes God to make it work. Paul's prayer is that the relational God will make our relationships work.

To request that the Father and Son "direct our way to you" literally means to make their way straight, remove any obstacles. Back in 2:18 he already alluded to Satan hindering their coming to them. But rather than addressing what that hindrance was or finding some magical way to prevent Satan's trickery, he goes to the power, God who desires that His people share a communal love, a love that is to be celebrated in the body of the church.

We have something to offer to one another

Paul's work with the church is not over any more than the Father and the Son will stop relating to one another. In the same way, we are called into community with one another and should ask God to remove whatever obstacles Satan may throw in our way.

Obstacles of distance from one county to another, socio-economic obstacles, age and station of life hindrances, can be torn down by God. There are also obstacles created by personality as well as by our sin or sins of others. Make Paul's prayer yours, because loving in a community like Cornerstone does not come easy or naturally. The fact that we proudly proclaim ourselves as a people imbibing God grace implies the truth that we need grace, that we are unlovable.

How can we have confidence that this communal love will work?

Knowing that our love of each other is patterned after God's love within the Godhead should strengthen us to risk loving, serving, being vulnerable to one another. There is no substitute for flesh-and-blood friends if we are to understand ourselves and grow in communion with God. But that flesh and blood community is what gets us covered with flesh and blood and it is messy. What am I to do when loving is hard? The next part of the prayer answers that.

OUR LOVE FOR OTHERS IS TO BE CONTINUAL v12

Continual love increases over time

Current thought tells us that love is at its peak when it is new and intensity lessens over time. The young couple is in love; the old married couple just tolerating each other. That, obviously, is not the way it is to be, but is the sad reality too often. Paul's prayer should be ours as well, that the Lord would make us increase and abound in love toward each other. We pray because we can't do it.

This was not a loveless church, but they still had room to grown in love, because love is an essential mark of the Christian faith. If you think you've reach the point in which you can coast in your relationships, pray this prayer and hold on for some rough water.

The two words used are synonymous, but show the full orb'd nature of love. Our love should increase, or literally super-abound, there should be an abundance of it, a surplus. It should abound, or excel, exceed any fixed number or measure.

So when you want to know the extent of your love, how far do I have to go with these people seated around me, next to me – the answer is always one step more.

Edith Schaeffer, author and wife of Christian teacher Francis Schaeffer once wrote:

There is a famine of compassion and unselfish, lasting, growing, true love among human beings because of the blast of egotistic desire to have "rights" protected. In the midst of the famine, however, a true reality of living in the light of the first commandment would bring an outpouring of an endless supply of love. To love God with all one's heart is not to use up love, but to increase it continually.³

We can't say that our love of God uses up our quotient of love for others, but rather the motivating power is knowing God's love for us, our response of loving him is then poured

out in a tangible way as we love others. Loving the one is in direct proportion to loving others. If you are having a tough time loving someone who is a royal pain in the neck, it is a fair conclusion that you do not love God, either.

Unfortunately, we live in an age in which we find our circles of love become ever smaller. That is the finding of a study conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, released last summer. It revealed that Americans have less people they can confide in than past generations.

In 1985, the average American had three people in whom to confide matters that were important to them. In 2004, that number dropped to two. Perhaps even more striking, the number of Americans with no close friends rose from 10% in 1985 to 24.6% in 2004.⁴

If those numbers reflect your life, the body of Christ is the place to begin so that your love will continue to grow and be strengthened. Be it the Triads for men, a ladies Bible study, just making the time to get together with someone for coffee – we should, by God's grace, look for those ways in which we might increase and abound in love for each other.

Continual love gives back

This love is to be for one another – it is not always one-sided. Note I said “always”, for sometimes it is. But what we should pray for, what we should look for is that there be a reciprocal nature to our love. If you are sitting here feeling unloved, can you honestly say that at the same time you have spent yourself loving those around you?

What is more, this love is not just for those in this room. The test of love is in how one relates not to saints and scholars but to rascals.⁵ Our growing compassion had better not be confined to these walls. We must look beyond them to others we come in contact with each and every day.

Now when we use such a large word as “love” it is easy to think of it on such a grand scale or a romantic kind of infatuation, that we miss what we are called to be and do here. It has been said that one of the greatest expressions of love is simply to notice people and to pay attention to them.⁶ The world isn't waiting for advice about how to solve its problems. It's waiting for somebody to listen to it and love it.⁷ We you sit across the table from someone, who dominates the conversation? How can you draw them out? What questions will you ask to show love?

If you want confidence that God is at work, pray this prayer. Ask God to put you in a place where your love must grow. But be careful with such a prayer as that, for if growth is the product, remember what must be combined with love? Conflict plus love equals growth.⁸

But what does that growth look like? What happens when we dare to love others?

OUR LOVE FOR OTHERS IS TO BE CONFORMING v13

Conforming love has the Father in mind - holiness

The result of these two desires Paul states in his prayer have a purpose to them. They should result in molding us to our God, to reflect his character.

If the previous prayer was one of change, of growth, this one is static, fixed. It is a word used of supporting a structure so that it will not fall. It is to be made as solid as granite. What a wonderful flipside to the previous prayer, for when we are bloodied from loving, we need to know that through all the twists and turns that God will not allow us to lose ground, but will secure us in our relationship with him.

This love that conforms us has God's very character as its heart.

Our world tells us that love breaks moral codes, if it is true love. Rather love in Scripture is defined as sacrificing for another. When we love, we are the closest to God's character as creatures can be.

For that reason Paul prays that their hearts be established blameless in holiness.

Blameless – that's a tall order. We are to be without defect or blemish that no charge can be brought against us that any accusation will fall due to lack of evidence.

The integrity of character is one of holiness – that ethical quality which alone can be applied to God. If you thought loving is hard, trying loving one another and remain blameless in holiness.

I've tried to maintain this in my marriage, but you and I both know that the more you love another person, the more they know you for who you really are – the more they see and know your faults. While many of you could well enumerate my failures, you would pale in comparison to the list Janet could create.

But before we resolve how this is even remotely possible for us to pray for ourselves, notice what Paul attaches to this – that we be formed to conformed to the Father's standards (is your confidence waning yet? But look how he again parallels the Father's role with the Son's, "before God and Father, ... at the coming of our Lord Jesus.

This is a double hit. How well will you be conformed to the Father's holiness at the last judgment?

Conforming love has the Son in mind - judgment

Paul makes a passing reference that he will detail more in the next chapter, the coming of Christ. The coming, literally the parousia, refers to more than just his arrival, but included the idea of his presence. This event is what Scripture defines as the last judgment, the final day, the time of accounting. Anyone confident at this point?

Earlier we read from John 13 where there is a juxtaposing of betrayal and love. Judas, betraying Jesus, goes out into the night and Jesus, knowing what is about to happen, calls those who remain behind to love one another. In that setting we should find ourselves more like Judas than those remaining behind. We fail at loving each other, but are rather good in betraying one another.

Then on top of that, we are to pray that God will establish us blameless in holiness before the Father when Jesus comes again.

If there is a time of trembling knees, this is it. Is Paul just trying to motivate us to be good, like a six year old the final days before Christmas? Not at all. Rather what Paul is prayer about here is that with Christ's return, what will be the source of your confidence? Where will you find shelter?

On August 13, 2004, Hurricane Charley brought fierce destruction to areas of Florida. During the storm, 25-year-old Danny Williams went outside to seek protection under the branches of a 55-year old banyan tree. Friends and family said that the protective branches of the spreading tree had been a favorite, peaceful place for the Fort Meyers man. But on that day, his place of safety became a death trap. The tree fell on Williams and killed him. Sometimes, the places and situations we look to for protection can ultimately be the most harmful.⁹

What is your shelter? Are you trying to muscle up the confidence on your own? Are you trying harder to love but finding love trying? How can you have confidence that you will ever grow in love and if not, what confidence can you have at the judgment seat of Christ? Can you honestly stand before God and say, "I was a loving person, just like you God!"

The answer comes in the one to whom we are praying. A prayer is not looking deep within our own resources to say we can do what we must, but is the first admission that we are helpless and hopeless. When we pray this we are not trying to pull a Joan Rivers, with plastic surgery give the appearance of confidence, the façade of love.

To have confidence before God we must have God's love credited to our account and at work in us day by day. The love is the love of Christ, who died for us, in our place, the lover pursuing a very unlovely bride. That is where we must rest, that is where we must find out what love looks like. Are you willing to learn to love by letting the love of Christ work in you?

¹ "The New and Improved Rivers," *The Week* (7-15-05), vol. 5, issue 215/216, p.10

² Andrew Murray in *With Christ in the School of Prayer*. *Christianity Today*, Vol. 35, no. 5

³ Edith Schaeffer in *Lifelines: The Ten Commandments for Today*. *Christianity Today*, Vol. 33, no. 2

⁴ Janet Kornblum, "Study: 25 Percent of Americans Have No One to Confide In," *USA Today* (6-23-06)

⁵ Abraham Joshua Heschel in *A Passion for Truth*. *Christianity Today*, Vol. 41, no. 9

⁶ Richard Foster, *Leadership*, Vol. 3, no. 1

⁷ Keith Miller. *Leadership*, Vol. 16, no. 4

⁸ Westy Egmont, *Leadership*, Vol. 1, no. 2

⁹ *Palatka Daily News* (8-18-04)