

1 Thessalonians 3:6-10

Intro June 10, 2007 Gospel Growth

In last Sunday's sermon I concluded with a story of Sally Robbins, a member of Australia's 2004 Olympic rowing team, how with 400 meters left in the race, she suddenly quit. Exhausted from the first part of the race, she could not go on, so she dropped her oar and the team lost the race. The response of her teammates and country, which takes rowing very seriously, was predictable but sad.¹

The failure of a team due to the downfall of one member is what makes team sports fun to watch, but fun to play. To win, individuals must bond as one.

During the same Olympic Games when Sally Robbins let her team down, the American women's 4x100 relay race experienced a similar problem. In '04 the Americans were favored to win the medal. The team featured Marion Jones, a sprinter who had won four gold medals at the previous games in Sydney. The American team was already off to a strong start when Jones took the baton for the second leg of the race. She gained ground as she ran her 100 meters and approached Lauryn Williams, a young speedster who would run the third leg.

Williams began running as Jones drew near, but when she reached back to receive the baton, they couldn't complete the handoff. Once, twice, three times Jones thrust the baton forward, but each time it missed William's hand—she couldn't seem to wrap her fingers around it. Finally, on the fourth try, they made the connection. But by that time, they had crossed out of the 20-yard exchange zone and were disqualified. Everyone knew they were the fastest team on the track. The night before, they'd had the fastest qualifying time. But when they couldn't complete the handoff, their race was over.²

As in any team sport, unity is vital if there is to be victory. A quality team is not a collection of qualified athletes, but unified organism functioning together. That is what Paul pictures for us in the five verses before us this morning in 1 Thessalonians 3:6-10. READ

In Paul's thanksgiving for this church, he touches on the components needed for crossing the finish line, for completing the race. For there to be growth in us personally, there must be interaction corporately. If I were to ask you: "What is your plan for spiritual growth this year?" you may think of a number of helpful programs or changes to put into place. You may consider a better quiet time, a new structure to your prayer life, times of fasting or reading some good books or attending a seminar. But in the end, the plans we often consider are rather private, personal and most often focused on the individual. We may come up with a variety of good things, but miss the most important, that in order to grow, we need others, to win as an individual, we must win as a body.

Paul's interaction with the Thessalonians has been positive, but brief. After beginning the church there, Paul and Silas were chased out of town; Paul wants to know how they are doing. When forced from town, Paul made his way south to Athens, while Silas and Timothy remained in Macedonia. In time Paul then went to Corinth, to the west and when there (Acts 18:5) sent for Timothy so that he could hear how it was going in Thessalonica. This travelogue is helpful because no matter where Paul was, his heart was still with these believers and he needed them as much as they needed him.

Because, as Christians we are united together, we need each other to grow, to grow stronger and to grow faith.

WE NEED OTHERS TO GROW STRONGER 3:6-7

We grow stronger through the gospel

Paul's candor reflects a view of spiritual growth to which we may not be accustomed. With Timothy's arrival in Corinth and news of how these young believers are faring under the pressures from family and friends, Paul describes the positive report with a peculiar word – good news.

It may not seem odd to us, but Paul employs a word that for him, every other time is translated with the technical phrase "preach the gospel". What Timothy brought was not just some good words to cheer Paul up, but when he told Paul about their faith and love, Paul heard the gospel.

Paul derived strength from the gospel that was evident in the lives of those he'd left behind. This gives us a window into what we need from each other. We need the gospel if we are going to grow.

Far too often the gospel is viewed as a passkey into the church. We explain Christ's death in our place as something to believe in at the beginning of our Christian life. Once we cross that threshold, the gospel ceases to be for us and is used for the non-Christian.

Unfortunately, such an attitude stunts our growth. The good news at work in the lives of those around us, at work in us, is our passport to further growth. It is what I need to hear everyday, that God graciously works in a failure like me, despite my efforts to do what is wrong. To hear good news of another believer's faith and love is a powerful encouragement for me, because when I struggle to see the relevance of Christ's death in my life, when it becomes old hat and then I hear of a Christian whose life has been radically changed, I know that God can and will still work in a cold heart like mine.

For those new to Cornerstone, you may hear us say that: "The Gospel is for Christians, too."

Each week as we worship, we hear the gospel. Not just so if, perchance an unbeliever is in our midst, but because you and I act like unbelievers all week long. I need help to believe such wonderful news. That is what we heard earlier from Mark 9, when the father, having believed enough to bring his son to be healed, confessed what is true for all of us, "I believe. Help my unbelief." We are all a mixture of believe and sin, we are, as Luther wisely said, simultaneous righteous and sinful. But the good news of the gospel is that we are accepted by the Father because of Christ's work on our behalf.

What was the good news Paul received from Timothy?

It was what Paul began this letter with, that great triad of Christian virtues: faith, love and hope. In 1:3 this is how Paul starts. He had sent Timothy (3:5) to find out how they were doing. As Proverbs 25:25 says, "like cold water to a weary soul, so is good news from a distant land."

There was faith and love, a summary of what should be in the Christian life. Faith looks toward God, love responds to those around us. They were orthodox in doctrine and impeccable in conduct. When a pastor hears this kind of news, no matter what else is happening, there is reason to be thankful. And if all else is going well, if the numbers are up, the offering is good, and success is evident, but these are missing, there is misery.

The hope is seen in the final part of the report that the church had longed to see Paul.

The word for *long* here speaks of a strong desire, of great affection, of an intense craving. The LXX uses this word when translating Psalm 42, speaking of the deer who pants just as David's soul pants for God. Yesterday Kyle ran a 10K race, his longest run this season. Chances are he was panting, he was longing for a drink of cold water. That is the picture we have here. That is the picture of hope.

We grow stronger through suffering

The effect of the good news gave strength to Paul as we see in v7. The reason I speak of strength here is because of the word used in v7 which we have translated as *comfort*.

When I hear comfort, I picture a shoulder to cry on, medication to ease the pain. But our word from the Latin means to strengthen and the Greek word used here likewise was of someone coming along side not to give soothing words to ease anxiety, but to rouse one up to action. It is the commander before the troops, giving them not only orders, but filling them with courage.

Notice the context of Paul's comfort – in distress and affliction. The good news of their growth gives perspective to Paul in his suffering.

Paul links two words to describe his situation: distress and affliction. We talked about affliction last week as that vice grip clamped on our lives, the pressure cooker of broken relationships and broken bodies. It was used of pressing grapes, so also in our lives; we can feel the crushing weight of problems. The first term, distress refers to the inevitability of the troubles. There are some problems we can escape in life by wise choices and careful attention. But this term reminds us that we live in a fallen world. No amount of right living will protect you from the sin of others or the sin that still resides in you. Suffering is inevitable.

At times like that we need to be comforted, strengthened, encouraged, that all is not hopeless.

But none of this happens in a vacuum. While God certainly can strengthen those in solitude, the normal, ordinary means of grace that God gives have community written all over them. Our growth will come only as we hear the gospel from others; see the gospel at work in others, so that when life is more than we can bear, we can be comforted not by our faith, but their faith.

A speaker tells this story: I used to go visit my brother in law, and he would never wear a seat belt in the car. I always berated him for it. I remember one time he picked me up at

the airport, and he had on his seat belt and shoulder harness. I said, "What happened? What changed you?"

He said, "I went to visit a friend of mine in the hospital who was in a car accident and went through the windshield. He had two or three hundred stitches in his face. I said to myself, *I better wear my seat belt.*"

We talked about that a little bit. I said, "Did you not know that if you don't wear your seat belt you go through the windshield if you have an accident?"

He said: "Of course I knew it. When I went to the hospital to see my friend, I got no new information, but the information I had became new. The information got real to my heart and finally sank down and affected the way I live."³

That kind of growth demands one another. It means you have to be in other people's lives or it will never take place. When you are going through a tough time, the temptation is to hibernate, cocoon. But what we need are others, who, while not giving us new information about life, will make the gospel new to us, showing us that God's grace works in so many ways.

One of the reasons we share prayer and praises with one another is for this reason. To hear how God is working in another's life when it seems He is rather silent in yours – should spur you on.

WE NEED OTHERS TO GROW IN FAITH 3:8-10

When we grow stronger in the gospel, seeing its affect in the lives of others as well in ourselves, we will then be more faithful. Our lives will change. That is what Paul says in the verses 8-10. Now we live ...

Paul's statement should arrest us. Paul is basing his life on others, something independent minded Americans are loathe to do, but the idea of the church as a body, an organism that needs others. I need you to grow if I am going to grow. My faithfulness to God is responsive to you in two ways – your stability and your growth.

We grow in faith as others remaining stable

Paul's life in Christ is tied into the Thessalonians standing fast, remaining stable.

This *if* clause does not question their stability, but assumes it while reminding them to continue standing in the future. They are to remain firm in their commitment to Christ. They must not retreat when under attack. What does their stability produce in Paul? Thanksgiving.

When others remain faithful we remain thankful. Not just because their stability means we don't have to pick up the pieces of their sin strewn lives, but because perseverance is but another evidence of the gospel at work in their lives, that God graciously is aiding them.

For that we should give God the glory.

When we don't have a view of Christian life as a one of growth in the body, we have a hard time doing this. We see others progressing and we become envious or saddened by our lives. But their progress is for your good. It is fine that we pray for those who are struggling with sickness or job loss, but when was the last time you paged through the directory just thanking God for the stability, the faithfulness of those seated around you here today?

Key to the Christian life is not stability alone. If its only stability you want be careful, the most stable people aren't breathing. While there is a benefit to seeing believers persevere, there is more to the Christian life than just making it through. There must still be growth.

We grow in faith as others grow in faith

The joy Paul expressed for these believers is summed up in his prayer for them, that he can finally see them face to face (an understandable desire) and supply what is lacking in their faith (huh?)

Paul is not implying any defect in their faith, but is describing normal growth we all require.

This is the word used of James and John mending their nets. To supply what is lacking means to arrange properly, put things in order. It was used in a military context of supplying troops before they go off to battle. In the same way we will grow in our relationship with Christ as we help others grow in faith. Paul uses the same word in Ephesians 4:12 that the various functions in the church exist to equip the saints with a view of building up the body of Christ.

You and I are not done when we just profess faith. We all are lacking in both the content of our faith and the practical outworking of that faith.

If you think you can survive, stand fast, grow in your relationship with Christ by remaining aloof from the body, ignoring the means of grace God provides for you, means that are found in the context of a community – you will have a very tough time.

For this reason we provide numerous avenues for you to supply what is lacking in others and what is lacking in you. Regular worship is a great place to start, but it is still rather disconnected if that is all there is. From here the Shepherd Groups are the place to connect with others, to see the gospel at work in their lives, to be comforted by their faith when your life is a shambles. There you can give thanks to God when others stand fast and you have the privilege to supply what they lack – because you are a part of their body.

Churches always have scores of places to serve, but they designed not just to keep you busy with committee work, but serve as points of connection with others. One in particular that is beginning this August are Triads for men, groups of three men who will meet more informally for encouragement. If you sense a stagnation in your spiritual growth, it may well be a simple case of a lack of connection with the body that challenges your faith. Don't confuse busyness with body life, but find those places where you will see that you need the body for your own growth.

When 13-year-old Natalie Gilbert was asked to sing "The Star-Spangled Banner" at a nationally televised NBA Western Conference playoff game, it was a dream come true. But what happened on the day of her performance was more like a nightmare.

On April 25, 2003, Natalie bravely stood alone at mid-court in Portland's Rose Garden Arena. As she began to belt out the familiar words of the national anthem before a capacity crowd, however, her mind went blank. She forgot the words. Closing her eyes and shaking her head, she appeared on the verge of tears.

At that moment Maurice Cheeks, the head coach of the Trailblazers, walked toward her. Cheeks put his arm around the girl and began singing with her.

"I didn't even know if I knew all the words, but as many times as I've heard the national anthem, I just went over and continued to sing," Cheeks told *CBS SportsLine*. "The words started coming back to me and I just tried to help her out."

As he reminded the girl of the lyrics she'd forgotten, he encouraged the crowd to sing along. They did. Together, they made it all the way through, to "the home of the brave."⁴

That is something we are all called to do for one another. In fact, if you are a member here of Cornerstone, you have taken a solemn vow to that end and, in a few minutes, you will do so again.

When a child, born to believing parents, is present here for baptism, the parents and all of us enter into an agreement that God offers to us. It is simply stated that He will be our God and we will be His people. That covenant has a physical symbol, baptism. But baptism is not just a sign of a personal covenant, but it is about community, God's people.

What will take place here in a few minutes is a picture of the gospel, the good news, that God calls people to Himself, that while we are dead in our trespasses and sins, God is the one who makes us alive. This takes place not by our works, whether it is our faith in God or sprinkling some water on a baby's head. It takes place solely by God's grace. This act, instituted by God, is to signify what salvation is all about – by God's grace we are cleansed and given the mark of identification with God's people.

But children? How can they be included? Throughout Scripture God works through families. In the Old Testament they were circumcised, in the New baptized. In each case there is faith. With a little one, it is the faith of a parent, just as we heard earlier in Mark 9, it was the father who believed and the son was healed. When it comes to baptism, it is not salvation. This child is not changed by what I do any more than what the child or parent does – rather this sign of God's grace calls this little one to, in time, believe the gospel for herself.

What's your job in all this? Work as a body, grow together. Look after her, encourage her parents when the stresses of parenting grow too hard. Remind them and her of God's faithfulness to his promise because of Christ's work.

In this we are seeking to pass the baton to the next generation. Hopefully we won't drop it or fail to do it in time, like Marion Jones in the Olympics. By God's grace, we will be faithful and grow in faith as we work together as the Body of Christ.

¹ "Rower suffers Aussie Backlash," www.News.BBC.co.uk (8-25-04)

² Bryan Wilkerson, "From Generation to Generation," PreachingToday.com

³ Adapted from Tim Keller audio workshop "Unintentional Preaching Models," Preaching to the Heart, CD 3; produced by Ockenga Institute of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

⁴ AOL News (4-28-03)