

## Chat with the Children

- Talk about how we choose gifts to give to others:
  - think of what they are like, really need, etc
  - put thought and care into it
  - not what we want, but for their benefit...
- This is also how we should pray for one another...

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## Introduction

- Seen Paul's love and concern for the Thessalonians:
  - family...
  - even though he'd only spent a very little time with them
- That theme continues in passage we read earlier:
  - can't we just skip on to where Paul starts to tell the Thessalonians what they should be doing?
- **No!**
  - because here he **expresses his love and concern for the Thessalonians**
  - **he prays for them**
  - And it is Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians that we are going to be concentrating on this morning

## A Passion for People

- Now we turn to Paul's Prayer itself. We have seen how a concern for others, a concern for God's people, lies at the heart of the way we lead our Christian lives. We have also seen that this deep seated love and concern for others will inevitably produce prayer - prayers of intercession for others.
- In 1 Thessalonians 3, as Paul prays for the Thessalonians, we find **one of the most revealing portrayals of the apostle's deepest emotions:**
  - his profound concern for these young believers manifests itself in the prayer itself **(3:9-13)**
  - and also in the surrounding verses
- So lets work through these verses and see what we can learn from Paul.

## Paul's Prayer is a Product of a Passion for People

- First, what is Paul thinking about as he comes to pray. From what does his prayer arise?

### Paul's prayer arises out of his intense longing to be with the Thessalonians.

- Acts 17:1-9. Paul and Silas beaten in Philippi; on to Thessalonica - not much better! Had to leave after a few short weeks. Next Berea, Athens, Corinth - and its probably from there that Paul looks back on the churches that he has recently planted. He's been able to spend next to no time in discipleship and training, making sure they could stand on their own feet - did they really get it all, are they truly firmly grounded on Christ?
- Paul doesn't look back at this situation as merely a frustrating aberration on an otherwise well planned missionary expedition. Its no mere hiccup - rather, he has a deep concern for the Thessalonians - and it is this that pains him so greatly: **"But brothers, when we were torn away from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you" (1 Thess 2:17), or again "So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker... For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless" (3:1-2a, 5).**

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- Here is a Christian so committed to the well-being of other Christians, especially new Christians, that he is simply burning up inside to be with them, to help them, to nurture them, to feed them, to stabilise them, to establish an adequate foundation for them. **And so he devotes himself to praying for them when he can't be with them personally.** He is passionately concerned with the well-being of other Christians he knows - and as he comes to pray, so his concern shapes what he prays.

### **Paul's prayer arises out of a passionate affection that seeks the good of others - not their praise, gratitude, acceptance, and still less some sense of professional fulfillment.**

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- Paul wishes he could be with the Thessalonians. Now, often when we hear someone telling us how great it would be to be back home with loved ones, we are not only hearing something of their love for those people, but also to confessions of current loneliness - they are missing those loved ones, missing being loved themselves. We like to be with those we love because in most instances they are the ones who love us.
- Such a sense of home is entirely normal, and certainly not to be despised. But there is an ugly variation of this for all of us involved in any kind of Christian ministry. Do we want to preach because folk say to us afterwards that they enjoyed the service? Or play a musical instrument so that we are praised? Or even visit in the name of the church so that the word gets round that we are a really caring soul? Has our desire to be **seen** serving God over-taken our desire to serve his people?
- Or maybe we find fulfillment in these forms of service, a joy that we don't find elsewhere... That too should never become our main motivation for service. The issue is service, service of real people. The question is "**How can I be most useful?**", not "**How can I feel most useful?**". Our goal should be "How can I best glorify God by serving his people?", not "How can I feel most comfortable and appreciated while engaging in some acceptable form of Christian ministry?"
- So Paul, when he could stand it no longer, sent Timothy "to strengthen and encourage [the Thessalonians] in [their] faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials" (1 Thess 3:2-3). Paul's deep affection for these believers, these recent converts, ensures that he isn't just interested in their welfare for his own sake; no, Paul is in agony out of his concern for their good. In short, Paul not only he wants to be with them, he wants to be with them for their good. And that is a demonstration of elementary Christianity. Did not Christ Jesus come to us, choosing to be with us, and this for our good? He chose the path of self-denial, dying in shame and degradation so that others might live. And he calls us to serve in the same way. And so Paul comes to pray - his prayers for the Thessalonians nothing more than an extension of the same love that he bore them.

### **Paul's prayer springs from unaffected delight at reports the the Thessalonians' faith, love, perseverance, and strength.**

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- The final thing that Paul's prayer springs from is his delight at their progress in the faith. Paul started the whole letter by thanking God for the Thessalonians: "**We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers**" (1 Thess 1:2); there he was looking back to his memories of the Thessalonians during the brief weeks he spent with them. As we have seen, being torn away from them has made him worried about how they have been getting on in the faith - but now he has heard via Timothy that they are getting on great! Good news! Paul is encouraged because of the Thessalonians faith. Paul is not one of those folk whose only interested in bad news, the latest scandal or rumour. No, **every report of growth in real fundamentals - in faith and love - becomes an occasion of great rejoicing for the apostle.**
- Where has Paul's prayer come from? Summarising what we've said, **Paul's prayer is the product of his passion for people.** His unaffected fervency is not mere whipped-up emotionalism but the overflow of his love for brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus.

- And that means that is we are to improve our praying, then we must strengthen our loving. As we grow in disciplined, self-sacrificing love, so we will grow in intercessory prayer.

### **Paul's Prayer Displays a Passion for People**

- Finally, we get to the prayer itself! There are a number of ways in which it could be broken up. Lets stick with people - exactly how do the people of God - in this case, those at Thessalonica - feature in this prayer? There are four themes that reveal Paul's continuing passion for his brothers and sisters in Christ.

#### **Paul prays with rich thankfulness for the people of God (3:9).**

- Hasn't Paul had enough of thanking God for the Thessalonians? He spent most of chapter one thanking God for them! Well, that's hardly how Paul sees things! His exuberance is, if anything, getting greater as he thanks God: "How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our god because of you?" (3:9).
- Note how he addresses his thanksgiving to God - but at the same time tells the Thessalonians what he is thanking God for. He casts his prayer in such a way as to encourage them. He isn't someone who pours out empty flattery in a constant flow, so that you might wonder whether he was trying to win a popularity contest. Neither is he acting like some sober, theologically precise types who, realising that all praise and thanks belongs ultimately to God, neglect to encourage anyone else along the way - perhaps thinking that we should be satisfied with God's "Well done!" on the last day.
- No, Paul doesn't fall into either of these extremes - he encourages Christians by telling them that he thanks God for his grace in their lives. Thus he has simultaneously drawn attention to the Thessalonians spiritual growth, thereby encouraging them, and insisted that God is the one to be thanked for it, thereby humbling them.
- How much would our churches be transformed if each of us made it a practice to thank God for others and then tell these others what it is about them that we thank God for? Note carefully the order - thank God first, and then let folk know. To simply say to others that we thanked God for them, when we didn't, would be rank hypocrisy, cheap religious cant - and worse, would smack of manipulation.

#### **Paul prays that he might be able to strengthen these believers (3:10-11).**

- "Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith" (1 Thess 3:10).
- Night and day. Not mere hyperbole. Nor floating in ill-defined "spirit of prayer" - with very little concrete praying. Rather, regular times for prayer day and night. So, constantly - for others. Do we pray too exclusively for ourselves?
- Burden of prayer - to see them that he may supply their need. Deficient through ignorance, not rebellion. Note mingling of prayer with his own service. Prepared to put his own comfort on the line. Not just Thessalonians might be strengthened (means unspecified), but that he might be involved. Isaiah 6:8 - here am I, send me! Prayer part of, not substitute for, Christian service. Paul, it would seem, can't long pray for believers without longing to serve them himself.
- Even hindrances and opposition do not discourage him, but incite him to greater urgency! (3.11 - Paul prays that "our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you.")
- All three points strengthen the connections between Paul's prayer life and his passion for the people of God.

#### **Paul prays that there might be an overflow of love among these believers (3:12).**

- "May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you" (3:12). Remember how little Christian instruction Paul had been able to give them before he left Thessalonica. Remarkable that this, then, is his prayer focus - and not that their doctrinal understanding would increase! Love going beyond honour system, with

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benefactors, in the Graeco-Roman world. And as we pray for other Christians, as we pray for our church here - are we praying that our love might increase and overflow? Certainly we should never put anyone down - except on our prayer list!

- That is why Paul returns to this petition again and again, not just here but in so many other of his prayers. How do we compare with Paul? Is the increase of Christian love a passionate interest in our own prayers?

### Paul prays that these believers will be so strengthened in heart that they will be blameless and holy when the end comes (3:13).

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- The heart - seat of our hidden motives, our real reasons for the way we behave. If our hearts are strengthened, if our guileless allegiance to Jesus Christ are enlarged, then we will not need to fear the day of the Lord. Knowing that God "will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts," Paul prays that Christians will be so strengthened that they will become "blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father." Paul has ultimate reality in view; he is praying with eternity's values. And that is why he displays such a passion for people. He knows that as we pray for people, we must do so knowing that these people, and we ourselves, are inevitably moving toward the last day. When we pray with eternity's values in view, we are driven to pray for people, because people like you and me are the ones who must give account to God on the last day.
- From that perspective, there is no prayer that is more fundamental than this: that God might strengthen their hearts so that they will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father on the last day.

## Conclusion

- So, how do we pray? Do we pray like Paul? With his passion for the people of God? With his rich thankfulness for all of God's people? That we ourselves might strengthen our fellow believers? That there might be an overflow of love amongst us? That our hearts might be strengthened, blameless and ready for Christ's return?
- What we learn from Paul isn't all there is to prayer - but let's today learn to pray with the apostle.
  - and lets pray - at Prayer Meeting, at housegroups, with other people as well as on our own...