

Serving the LORD

2 Thessalonians 3:1-5

If you read the gospels you will find a number of moments where Jesus' disciples say and do things that go over like a lead balloon.

Mark ten and Matthew twenty tell us about a moment like that with James and John.

Jesus' had just told them about how He was going to suffer and die and James and John come to him with their mother to ask Jesus for something.

They ask for one to sit on Jesus' right hand and the other to sit on His left in glory.

They were asking to have to top two positions in Jesus' kingdom.

Instead of concern for what Jesus was about to endure, their top concern is getting positions of power.

Jesus' responds by saying, "*You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?*"

He was asking, "Can you sacrifice and suffer like me?"

Without much thought they say, "Yes"

He responds by telling them that they will drink the same cup and go through the same baptism, but the top spots in the kingdom are 'for those for whom it has been prepared.'

The bible says when the other ten heard the request of James and John they 'began to be indignant' meaning they were upset/angry.

They weren't upset out of their concern for what Jesus was about to go through, they weren't upset because they thought the question was wrong in and of itself, they were upset because they wanted the positions of power for themselves.

Jesus takes a moment and speaks to them about position and power.

He says, "*You know that those was are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.*"

[In the kingdom of heaven the way up is the way down. The way to greatness is putting ourselves last for the sake of serving God and others. You know what, that is hard. It is good and it brings us to a place of great satisfaction and joy, but it is hard. It is hard because serving the LORD puts us at odds with the world and with our own selfish desires. The apostle Paul and the believers in Thessalonica knew that first hand. Paul knew well the cost of serving Christ and he also knew what was necessary in order to keep serving the LORD. Our text for this morning **2 Thessalonians 3:1-5** reminds us of some of things that serving the LORD

requires. If we have any desire to serve the LORD this morning then we need to give our attention to these things. The first thing we are reminded of in this passage is that...]

Point #1 – Serving God requires God’s power. (Verse 1-2)

Any ability a human being has is on account of the LORD granting it, how much more the Christian must understand his/her need of grace in doing gospel work.

The words ‘finally, brothers’ that begin chapter three mark the beginning of the last section of this letter.

Paul has written to these believers about trials that must be faced in the last days and the hope of the church which is the coming of Christ.

He has written to them concerning what God has done for them through the Lord Jesus and the work of the Spirit to bring them to Himself.

He has prayed for them and now he says in chapter three verse one, he says,
“Finally, brothers, pray for us.”

I find it amazing that the apostle Paul would ask these relatively new believers who were just regular people who likely had no influence, fame, or earthly power to pray for him and his fellow workers.

Jesus himself had appeared to Paul and set him apart for the preaching of the gospel.

He was a highly educated man and a man of great ability from the perspective of earthly wisdom.

He performed miracles through the power of the Holy Spirit and yet, he still sees himself as a man in need of prayer and he sees the prayers of regular average everyday Christians as something to be desired.

Why? Because everyone who knows Christ is granted the privilege of speaking directly to God and because God listens to and responds to the prayers of His people it is a powerful tool in seeing the work of God’s kingdom done upon the earth.

This is also more than a onetime request. The intent of the original language is that he is asking them to be constantly in prayer for him.

Paul has learned by experience how much he needs the LORD to be an ambassador for Christ and he wants every believer to learn that same lesson and so he pleads with the Thessalonians to be consistently praying for him and his gospel co-workers.

Let’s look together at what he wants these believers to pray for in **verses 1-2.**

The word translated ‘speed ahead’ most literally means to run.

The idea is that the preaching of God’s word would go forward unhindered.

He also wants God’s word to be ‘honoured’ some translations say ‘glorified’.

Meaning it would be received with reverence, accepted as true, and believed by those who hear.

Those things happens by the power of the Holy Spirit calling people from death to life through the preaching of the gospel and so he asks believers to pray.

He also asks them to pray that he and his co-workers might be 'delivered from wicked and evil men.'

From what we know of Paul's ministry recorded in the Bible for us, he faced some really severe opposition at times.

In Philippi he was put in jail, in Lystra he was stoned and left for dead, in Jerusalem a group of forty men make a vow to go without food and water until they had taken his life.

It is people and situations like this that he has in mind when he is asking for prayer.

Not everyone has 'faith', he says, people are going to act against those who labour for the LORD, but those people never have the final say over anything.

God is sovereign over all of that so pray!

Paul won't be delivered by his own power or influence, he will be delivered by the power of the LORD so pray for that!

Paul knows his need of the LORD and he knows that God listens to his people and so he asks for prayer from common believers.

[Jesus taught the disciples about this with the picture of a vine in John 15. The LORD describes himself as the main part of the vine and his disciples as the branches. In that picture the branches or the shoots are completely dependent on the vine to do anything. Cut the branch off and it's all done, but keep a healthy connection with the vine and the branch does well.]

Praying and asking for prayer is simply recognizing the nature of our relationship with the LORD and His work in the world.

It is absolutely true that God uses people to do His will in the world, but He is the One making it happen.

Whether the gospel is preached in a pulpit, on a street corner, in a living room, coffee shop, workplace, classroom, or anywhere else if it is going to change someone's life it is because the LORD is making it happen.

Listen, every single Christian has the opportunity to participate in that by talking to God and asking Him to work in the hearts of people so that the Word of God would go forward and be believed.

[If the apostle Paul needed the prayers of God's people how much more do we? If the Thessalonians having been reconciled to God through the blood of Jesus could come before the throne of grace to pray like this, what keeps us from doing the same? Nothing. The power of prayer is not in title or position. The prayers of a pastor carry no more weight than the prayers of other believers. The power of prayer is with the One who hears His people. All the hope that we have in serving the LORD depends on His power and when we pray we are simply living out that reality. Now that reality comes with a very important promise which we are told about in the next two verses. The promise is that...]

Point #2 – God keeps us as we serve Him. (Verses 3-4)

Proverbs 3:5 says to “*Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.*” It says that because the creator and sustainer of all things is trustworthy. He has promised to keep His people into eternity and He will be faithful to that promise.

When Paul asks these believers to pray that he and his fellow workers might be ‘delivered from wicked and evil men’ he no doubt has been praying the same prayer for the Thessalonians.

He clearly remembers having been torn away from them on account of turmoil being stirred up in the city for the purpose of opposing the gospel.

It is people opposed to the gospel that he has in mind when he says, ‘not all have faith’ in verse 2, he is talking about people who reject Jesus.

The heart of the gospel is that human beings have broken God's laws and that makes us objects of His just and eternal wrath.

That is the bad news and there is nothing we can do to fix that in fact everything we try to do to fix that makes it worse.

There is good news however, that God the Son took on humanity and lived in perfect obedience to God the Father.

In His perfection He stood in our place and took the wrath of God for us when He died on the cross.

We know that God is fully pleased with Jesus' life and death because Christ rose from the dead and ascended into heaven.

When we turn away from ourselves and turn to Jesus and trust in Him alone for our forgiveness, when we accept Him as Lord, then we are made right with God and given the hope of eternal life.

It is the best news ever but it is a message that means giving up whatever belief system you had before and submitting to the will of God instead.

When people see the gospel as a threat to what they have built their life and identity on they often respond with hostility.

That is what Paul and the Thessalonians were dealing with.

In the face of that he says this in Verse 3.

‘The Lord is faithful’.

Let's reflect on that for just a moment. To be faithful means to be both unwavering in commitment and capable of keeping promises.

It means to be loyal, reliable, dependable, and true.

Why are those things all true of God?

Because it is His very nature.

The bible says God does not change (Malachi 3:6), and it says, He does not lie (1Samuel 15:29).

He must do what He says because it is Who He is.

Faithfulness is something more than something the LORD does it is His very nature.

So when it says here, "He will establish you" we should hear that as an unchangeable promise.

Wicked and evil men who seek the downfall of God's people will fail, because the unmatched power of the living God will strengthen those in Christ so that we will endure until the end.

The LORD will also be 'faithful' to 'guard [believers] against the evil one.'

Commentator Robert Thomas argues that this is a picture of military protection against the assaults of our great enemy.

The Bible is pretty clear on the point that the devil is seeking the destruction of those that belong to God through faith in Jesus Christ, but he will fail because the LORD Himself is acting as our shield and defender.

In the case of the Thessalonians this is something Paul sees as getting worked out in their lives (Verse 4).

The forces of evil were giving these believers all kinds of reasons to give up and go back to their lives of idolatry, but instead they were living in obedience to God's word and Paul has every expectation that they will continue to do so because He is confident 'in the LORD.'

Each believer's faith and obedience to Christ is both demonstrating his/her trust in the LORD and proving that he/she is being kept by the saving power of Christ.

[Imagine something fragile like a vase made of glass or ceramic on display somewhere. Anybody have something like that on a pedestal at home or work? What would happen if somebody bumped into the pedestal and it fell off and hit the floor? It would most likely be shattered into many pieces. If you want to keep that from happening you need to do some things to keep it safe.]

That is the exact picture the bible gives for us.

In 2 Corinthians 4 believers are described as 'jars of clay' with the treasure of the gospel inside.

It says, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.

Why is something so fragile so indestructible?

Because the power of the LORD keeps the jar of clay whole.

[That is an amazing picture of what the LORD does for us. It is a truth that if believed will humble us in the best possible way. Because if we believe it we will understand that our hope depends completely on the LORD and not on ourselves. Since that is true if we hold on to that it will free us from everything that keeps us from serving Him. So how does that happen? I think Paul tells us as he once again turns to prayer in verse 5. His prayer shows us that...]

Point #3 – Knowing God’s love enables us to persevere in serving Him. (Verse 5)

When we have a sense of the LORD’s deep and abiding affection for us and when we feel a deep and abiding affection for Him, it will sustain us as we seek to live for Him according to His grace.

Listen to how the apostle prays for believers Verse 5.

As we have said on a number of occasions it is important to have a right understanding of love.

Love is a tender hearted affection which desires the highest good of the object of that affection.

To say it another way, to truly love someone means to care deeply about their highest good.

Our highest good is to be in the visible presence of the LORD in a renewed creation with renewed bodies forever.

God cared about making that happen so much that He sent Jesus into the world to face every temptation possible to humanity, to suffer humiliation, and to be nailed to a cross to bear the punishment for our rebellion against Him.

On account of His great love God raised Jesus from the dead to live and reign over all things forever.

Because of His love, Christ will come again and gather us to Himself, He will according to His justice remove every trace of sin from a renewed creation and fill our hearts with everlasting joy.

Here is the thing. If we know that love, I mean really know it in the deepest parts of who we are, then we are going to start showing that kind of love to others.

When that starts happening then the war between the work of the Spirit and the desires of our sinful nature is really on.

It's hard to love people with genuine godly love and that is why Paul prays also for the hearts of believers to be directed 'to the steadfastness of Christ'.

The Friberg Greek dictionary defines the word translated 'steadfastness' here as "adherence to a course of action in spite of difficulties."

I sometimes make the mistake of narrowing the focus of Jesus' perseverance to the cross. That is certainly the greatest display of His unrelenting persistence in doing the will of God, but we really have to see His whole life and ministry in the same light.

I can hardly begin to wrap my mind around the patience He demonstrated with sinful humanity as He lived perfectly for more than three decades.

Think of the patience He showed with His disciples.

Though He possessed the power to wipe away His enemies with a thought, He consistently showed grace moment by moment.

With the full weight of atoning for our sins upon His shoulders He prayed to the Father, "Your will be done."

Jesus was unrelenting in His redeeming work because of His perfect love for the Father which is worked out in His love for His people.

That will never change.

That is amazing and that is why the apostle prays that we would know that in our hearts, because if we know the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ we will also persevere in serving the LORD.

[I'm sure most of you have heard of the Wright brothers. They were the first to successfully design, build, and fly an airplane. Did you know that before the first successful flight and even after they had a number of crashes? Every time they got into their latest machine to make an attempt at flying whoever was in the machine was in real danger of dying. Why keep doing it then? For the prize of the accomplishment.]

The truth of it is we stick at things that we see value in and we give up the things we see as unimportant or unattainable.

That is why this prayer is prayed, because as believers we need to feel the treasure of the LORD in our hearts.

If we just begin to see how much the Love of God in Christ outweighs everything else in all creation, then we will never want to give up serving Him.

If we can even begin to understand the magnitude of Jesus' worth then we will see that He is worth giving up everything for.

If we can see that it will change everything.

Husbands and wives do you want a better marriage? Resolve to serve the LORD.

Moms and dads do you want what is best for your children? Make it your aim in life to serve the LORD.

Do you want to find contentment and peace at work? Ask yourself, “What does it look like to work at your job like you are seeking to make God happy?”

If we are going to do that we are going to need God’s power, so let’s spend some time on our knees asking the LORD to revive hearts through His Word.

Let’s remember that we have every reason to be both humble and confident as we seek to serve God because He will keep us.

Let’s ask God to direct our hearts towards His love because that will enable us to keep serving Him no matter what.

Whatever we may do and whatever we may be known for, may our greatest desire be to serve the LORD in everything.