

## Increasing and Abounding in Love

Leviticus 19:13–18, 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13

*Love* is a huge theme in the Bible. One of the most well-known and treasured verses is John 3:16, “For God so *loved* the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” Elsewhere, the Bible says, “God demonstrates His own *love* toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”<sup>1</sup> “Behold what manner of *love* the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!” “In this was manifested the *love* of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him.”<sup>2</sup> “Greater *love* hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”<sup>3</sup> Truly, there is no greater love than that of God, who would send his only Son to die for unworthy sinners. As the hymnwriter put it, “Amazing love! How can it be that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?”<sup>4</sup> Such love!

Our New Testament text this morning is an eloquent prayer. Essentially, it is a prayer for greater *love*. The apostle prays for three things: (1) proximity, (2) maturity, and (3) sanctity. Let’s look at these elements in turn, first:

### 1. Proximity

Paul says, “Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you.” Paul references the First and Second Persons of the Trinity: the Father and the Son. “The Father sent his Son into the world that we might live through him.” The Son in turn sends the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, “But when the Comforter is come, whom *I will send unto you* from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me” (John 15:26). The Spirit’s focus will be on Christ; he will testify of Christ, he will lift up Christ. The Spirit proceeds from the Father from eternity, but the Son sends him in time.

So Paul prays, “Now may our God and Father Himself, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way to you.”

Here is a reference to travel, Paul asks God to direct his *way* or *path*. The original is ὁδός, the common word for *road* (from which we get our English word odometer, which measures distance along a road). “Way” can be used figuratively, as in Psalm 1:6, “For the LORD knoweth the *way* of the righteous: but the *way* of the ungodly shall perish”—meaning something like “the Lord knows the path of life of the righteous, as well as the path of life of the wicked; the one leads to heaven, the other to eternal damnation.”

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<sup>1</sup> Rom. 5:8

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 3:1, 4:9

<sup>3</sup> John 15:13

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.trinitypsalterhymnal.org/hymns/and-can-it-be-that-i-should-gain/> accessed 2-24-24

Paul wants God to direct his way. Let's develop this a little more. In Psalm 139, which begins, "O LORD, thou hast searched me and known me," the psalmist observes in verse 3, "You comprehend my *path* and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my *ways*." Interesting language, "my path and my lying down"! A "path" is taken when awake; "lying down" means sleep. This is the totality of our existence. Humans are built to move around; that is why God gives us legs. Our path is all our travels throughout the day; our lying down is what we do at night. Here is an instance of what is called *hendiadys*, the expression of a single concept using two words. When the Psalmist says, "You understand my path and my lying down," he is saying that God understands every aspect of his life.

But the verb is a puzzler; it is something God wants us to ponder over. The Hebrew is a word meaning to *winnow*: "You winnow my path and my lying down." To winnow is to separate chaff from the grain using a current of air. Winnowing grain cleanses it—improves it—leaving the pure grain that can be eaten. Here is a description of God's sanctifying work in the believer's life.

This word is rendered variously in the translations. The KJV has "thou compassest"; the NKJV "you comprehend"; the ESV: "you search out"; the NASB: "you scrutinize," taking the meaning from the parallel in the second part of the verse: "you are *familiar* with all my ways." But the original sense, "you *winnow*—you *cleanse*—my path and my lying down" is instructive. The meaning is "you sanctify every part of my life."

Christian, God knows your path. Wherever you go, whatever you do, he knows it. His knowledge of you is perfect, comprehensive and intimate. You cannot escape his gaze. At the final day you will give account. Such knowledge is an encouragement to the Christian to stay on the straight-and-narrow path. For the person without Christ it should be an utterly terrifying realization: *God knows everything I do at all times. He knows me intimately. He knows my sin. He knows I do not measure up to his standard of absolute perfection. I cannot escape his gaze. He has a dossier on me. He will never forget any of this. This is what I am going to be judged on at the final judgment. There is no hope for me. I am going to hell. There is no denying it.* If that is you, then you need to repent of your sins and turn to Christ. You need to change your ways. But for the believer, the fact that God winnows—that is, cleanses and perfects—every aspect of your life ought to be a great encouragement. God cares about you. He loves you. He is improving you. He is making you a fitter, sharper tool in his hands. He wants you to be a blessing to people around you—to your family, your neighbors, your church. If you are born again, then you want to be a tool in the Master's hands. While you are here on this earth he has a purpose for you. He wants to use you to be a blessing to people around you. He is winnowing you. He is preparing you for something greater. He has a perfect plan for you.

I think of my mother-in-law in a nursing home. She knows the Lord. She wants to go home to be with the Lord. She is dependent upon the nursing staff to get her out of bed and put her in her wheelchair every day. She wheels herself all over the nursing home. She would love to be with family, but that is impossible at this stage of her life. She is often lonely. When we visit her we remind her that God hasn't taken her home to heaven yet. He has her here on this earth for a purpose. He wants her to be a blessing to people around her. Even at this late stage of life at age 101 God is *winnowing* her, sanctifying her, improving her, so that she can be a fitter servant in the Master's hands.

If you belong to Christ, he is winnowing you. He is working out his perfect plan for your life. He wants you to be a blessing to others. He wants you to do more than sit around playing online games all the time. He wants you to get involved with family members, with neighbors, with your church family. He wants you to be other-centered. He wants to use you as his tool—a tool in the master's hand! Here is a message for every Christian, for every member of the body of Christ, no matter your age, no matter the degree of your sanctification. God wants you to be a blessing to others. Yes, you! Here is the will of God for your life—right now! This is the voice of God speaking to your conscience.

Paul prays that God would direct his way. But notice *where* Paul wants to go. It is simple but profound: “to you”! The word for “you” is plural. This is important. Paul was not desirous of going to Thessalonica simply to catch up with an old friend, but with the whole congregation. Paul's focus was the church. Paul knew that Christians need the body. Christ ministers to his people through the body. The spiritual health of the individual Christian depends in large measure on the health of the local church. When a congregation is taught the pure word of God, and growing in faith and love toward one another, it is an atmosphere where the individual Christian can thrive. On the other hand, if a people are being taught the opinions of man rather than the pure word of God, they are being deprived of the true spiritual nourishment.

The most important part of a journey is the destination. There was a news item awhile back where a 6-year-old boy was put on the wrong flight and wound up at a different destination than the one his parents sent him to. His grandmother, who had gone to the airport to meet him, was frantic. Where was her grandson? The destination matters!

Paul wants God to direct his way to the Thessalonians: “Now may our God . . . direct our way to *you*.” Paul wanted to spend time face-to-face with the Thessalonians. This is proximity. Proximity is nearness, closeness, presence.

Paul prays that God would direct his way to Thessalonica. Why did he want to go there? To spend time with the members of the church! Paul loved the Christians

in Thessalonica and wanted to see them face-to-face. He was not content to remain apart.

An acquaintance of mine lives in Lansing but is married to a woman who lives in Texas. Both seem to be content with the arrangement and are taking no steps to move in together. Surely there is something wrong with that picture! A loving husband wants to live with his wife!

When a young man gets serious about finding a wife, he doesn't want a long-distance relationship, he wants to live with her! He wants to enjoy her presence, to spend time with her, to share life together. God created us as social beings, meant to have fulfilling relationships with God himself first of all, and then with other people—members of the body of Christ. The apostle John wrote: “what we have seen and heard we also declare to you, so that you may also have *fellowship* with us; and indeed our *fellowship* is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.”<sup>5</sup>

The Christian's joy is complete when he is in fellowship with the triune God through Christ, and in fellowship with his body the church. That's the kind of relationship Paul wanted with the saints in Thessalonica.

Christian, let us develop the habit of putting down our phones and looking into the eyes of people around us. All around us are people who are hurting, who long for a human touch, who need to be ministered to in Christ's name. “I was sick, and you visited me: I was in prison, and you came unto me.” We can be Christ's ministers, living Christ before them.

Paul was not content to carry on a long-distance relationship. He wanted to spend time face-to-face with the Thessalonians. He wanted to be in proximity to them. Paul prayed that God would direct his way to Thessalonica. Second,

## **2. Maturity**

Paul continues his prayer: “And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you.” Here is *maturity*, God's people maturing in the faith. Maturing in the faith involves two things: knowledge of God and knowledge of people. Both are essential. Some Christians want to know God but aren't so eager to know people. The Bible says, “The Lord *knoweth* them that are his.”<sup>6</sup> God knows his people perfectly. He knows everything about us. God wants us to know other people. He wants us to get involved in the lives of other people. This is his will for us.

We see this in Paul's prayer: “may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all.” What is the meaning of the word “all”? In the original the word *all* could be masculine, feminine, or neuter. If it were masculine it would mean *all people*. If it were feminine it would mean *all women*. If it were

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<sup>5</sup> Christian Standard Bible, 1 John 1:3–4, [https://biblehub.com/csb/1\\_john/1.htm](https://biblehub.com/csb/1_john/1.htm)

<sup>6</sup> 2 Tim. 2:19

neuter, it would mean *all things*. The old King James Version has: “the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all *men*.” In our egalitarian-conscious culture, such language comes across as paternalistic, as a vestige of ancient patriarchy. So the NKJV and the ESV drop the word “men” and say, “in love to one another and to all.” This obscures the gender of the original. In Elizabethan English “men” meant *people*—both men and women. Certainly God is not teaching us to love men but not women! The New American Standard Bible gets it right: “may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all *people*.” The apostle Paul is expanding on our second-Great Commandment duty to love our neighbor. Christians are to be full of genuine love for “people.” Some people are more lovable than others. Some people are more pleasant to be around than others. Paul is not saying that we should increase and abound in love for our good friends. Notice his words: “may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all *people*.” Some people are hard to love. Some people are ornery and rub us the wrong way. As Linus famously said, “I love mankind; it’s people I can’t stand.”<sup>7</sup>

God wants us to love other people, even those that are hard to love. In this we reflect the love of Christ. God so loved the “world”—lovable people and ornery people. All of us have been affected by the fall. All of us are sinners. By nature we are rebels and haters of God. What a wonder that Christ did not come to die for *lovable* people, for people that deserved salvation! The fact of the matter is that *none* of us deserved salvation. But Christ died for us anyway. If God so loved us, then we ought to love other people. That is our duty. It is inescapable. When we stand before God at the final day we are going to be judged on this matter: did we love other people? This is the clear command of Scripture. It is not some obscure, arcane doctrine. It is as plain as anything ever gets. God wants us to love him with all our heart. He wants us to love other people. Nobody will ever be able to say that God did not make that plain enough.

Christianity is unique in this regard. As we read in our Old Testament reading, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself: I am the LORD” (Lev. 19:18). Some would argue that this is a tenet of Judaism, but rabbinic Judaism follows the Talmud more than the Old Testament. Modern Judaism teaches love for Jews but not for other people.

The Koran does not teach love for one’s neighbor. You will not find “love your neighbor as yourself” in the Koran. The extreme version of Islam teaches “death to the infidel!”

Christians are to follow *all* of Scripture. Jesus taught, “Thy word is truth.” He did not teach that truth was to be found elsewhere than in God’s word. He did not

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.gocomics.com/peanuts/1959/11/12/> accessed 2-24-24

teach us to put our faith in man, or in the church, but in the infallible word of the living God.

Notice again Paul's words: "may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all *people*." "Increase" means to become greater in number. When a family increases, new people are added. "Abound" means to be present in great quantity. An abundant harvest means a bumper crop, your fruit trees laden, hanging low with fruit.

Paul longed to be with the Thessalonians in person, but in the mean time, while he was as it were "orphaned"<sup>8</sup> from them—absent from them—he wants them to increase and abound in love: to grow in number, with men, women and children being added to the church, and to be fruitful, bearing gospel fruit, an abundant harvest of loving the saints and loving those whom God providentially brought into their lives. Paul wanted them to grow to maturity in love. Thirdly,

### **3. Sanctity**

Paul concludes his prayer with the words "so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints."

Here is the end goal: that we would be fully mature and perfected in our faith when we stand before Christ at the final judgment. When we are born again, when we have received Christ as our personal Lord and Savior, we are not instantly perfected. We are to *grow* in our knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul testified of this in his own life. He said, "Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:12–14). The great apostle Paul admitted that he still had a ways to go. He was not yet fully sanctified.

And so it is with us. We need to be honest and admit that we have not yet attained a state of perfection. But we, like Paul, need to "press on toward the mark." The mark—the goal—is the perfection of Christ himself. None of us have attained to the perfection of Christ. None of us will attain to that perfection in this life. But we know that when he shall appear at the final day, we will be like him.<sup>9</sup> Our sanctification will be complete.

Are you content to stay in the *status quo*, to make no progress in your faith? If so, then you may not be born again. But if you are born again, then you will not be content to stay in the *status quo*. You will want to grow in your faith. You will make the effort to grow in your faith.

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<sup>8</sup> ἀπορφανισθέντες, from ἀπορφανίζω, *make an orphan of*, 1 Thess. 2:17

<sup>9</sup> 1 John 3:2

Here, then, is the apostle's prayer for the church at Thessalonica. Paul's praying for the church is a characteristic of a number of his epistles.<sup>10</sup> What a rich and meaty prayer this is! Paul wants us to increase and abound in love to the intent that we might be perfected in holiness when we stand before Christ at the final judgment. He wants us to "increase" and "abound"—to produce more fruit trees and more fruitful trees, that each tree would bring forth an abundant crop. What is the "crop" apostle Paul is speaking of? It is love (ἀγάπη)! This is the word used of the love of Christ—a selfless, giving love.

How do we show love to one another? By spending time with each other, by listening to each other, by praying for one another, by bearing each other's burdens, by speaking the truth of the gospel to each other, by admonishing each other when needful, by being unselfish, by putting others' needs ahead of our own when appropriate—a multitude of ways!

God so loved us that he sent his Son to save us from our sins. He wants us in turn to be his hands and feet, showing his love to the world. Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> Eph. 1:15–21, 3:14–19; Phil. 1:3–11; Col. 1:9–14; 2 Thess. 1:11–12