

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Dear Friends in Christ,

Now that Thanksgiving is over the question you will be asked more and more is, “are you ready for Christmas?” There are many things that need to be done before Christmas. There are gifts to purchase, there are cookies to bake, there is cleaning to be done, and a tree to set up and decorate in addition to all the normal things that still need to happen each day. As we all know, all the extra busyness of the holidays can easily distract us from the whole reason we are celebrating. We can easily forget that we are preparing for the celebration of Jesus’ birth.

Paul was worried that the Christians in Thessalonica were having a similar struggle. There was some very strong persecution going on in Thessalonica. After Paul had preached there for a few weeks some of the Jewish leaders were so jealous of his success that they stirred up a riot. Paul had to leave during the night and go to Berea. In fact, his persecutors were so determined that when they found out that Paul was preaching in Berea they followed him to stir up trouble for him there as well. Paul was worried that, since the Thessalonian Christians were new to the Christian faith that they would waver or even give up their faith when they suffered for it. He was worried, not that they wouldn’t be ready to celebrate Christmas, but something far more important that applies to us as well, he was worried that they wouldn’t be prepared for Jesus’ second coming on Judgment Day.

Paul wrote these words, guided by the Holy Spirit, to encourage them, and us, to Prepare for Christ’s Coming by growing in faith and overflowing in love.

Because Paul had been so worried about the Thessalonians he had sent Timothy to Thessalonica to see how they were holding up under persecution. Timothy had just returned with good news. The Thessalonians were standing firm in their faith. Their faith and love, even in the midst of persecution, was known and admired all over Greece. Paul was greatly relieved and filled with joy he gave thanks to God. But, that didn’t mean that he could forget about them and move on. He knew from his own experience that standing firm in the faith is an on-going struggle.

Paul is the one who talked in detail about his own personal struggle. He says, **what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing... I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God--through Jesus Christ our Lord! He says, I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.**

It is in this light that Paul writes that he keeps praying that God will grant him the ability and the opportunity to visit Thessalonica again so that he might be able to **supply what is lacking in their faith.**

If you received a letter from a pastor that said that he was praying that he might be able to visit you so that he could supply what was lacking in your faith, what would your reaction be? If you are like most people, you might be offended. You might think, “My faith is just fine, thank you. Who are you to say that there is something lacking in my faith?”

I’ll never forget a husband and wife who were members of my first congregation. They had not been to church in years. The elders and I had visited them and encouraged them to attend so that through the word and sacrament they could grow and remain strong in their faith. They still

never attended worship so finally we asked them to come to an elders meeting. When they did not come, we put them under church discipline. In response they wrote a letter that showed how weak their faith had become. The letter basically said that we shouldn't be wasting our time on them, they were good people. We should be going after those bad people who spent all their time in the bars. They didn't see that there was anything lacking in their faith. They didn't see a need to keep growing in their faith. As a result, they may not have been prepared for Christ's coming.

What about you? Do you feel a need to keep growing in your faith? Could you identify an area where you are weak, or do you think that your faith is just fine; as strong as it needs to be?

I truly appreciated our seminary professors, who every day demonstrated to us that they had a thorough understanding of the Bible and that they had a very strong faith; and yet they would often admit that they too had to continue to grow. They too had to struggle each day against their own sinful nature. They too needed to continue to be in the word and to receive the sacrament so that they would not be unprepared for Christ's coming and, after preaching and teaching the word, end up being disqualified for the prize.

It doesn't matter how long you have been a Christian, or how well you think you know the word. We have very powerful enemies. We never know when we will be called upon to face persecution. We never know when we might experience the refining fire of disaster or loss or disease and be tempted to give up on God. We need to be in God's word daily at home. We need to gather with our fellow Christians for worship and Bible study, for in addition to the Holy Spirit working through word, we learn from and are joined together in fellowship with fellow Christians who can give us help and support and encouragement in any time of need. We need the constant reminder, **if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall**. It's not so important how or when you became a Christian, but that you remain a Christian, for only those who **stand firm to the end will be saved**.

Prepare for Christ's coming by continuing to grow in faith. Remember, God promises that the Holy Spirit works through the word and sacrament to assure us Jesus has come to earth, that he has paid for all our sins, that he has risen from the dead, that he is sitting at the right hand of God interceding for us and preparing a place for us, that he is with us through out our earthly lives, and that he will come again to take us to be with him forever. As we celebrate his birth and await his coming again in glory Paul prays that we will **overflow in love toward each other and everyone else**.

When we talk about love it's important to understand that love is more than a feeling we have toward someone or something. It's more than an emotion. Love, true love, shows itself in actions. We see that in God. If God's love were merely a feeling or an emotion, we would be in big trouble. If God's love was only an emotion imagine what would have happened when, despite his very clear command and warning, Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit and totally messed up his perfect creation. If God's love was only an emotion imagine where we would be, for we too have disobeyed God's clear commands and ignored his warning, not just once, but many times. **But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us**. He so loved a world filled with sin and sinners that he GAVE his one and only Son. God's love is defined by his actions.

Paul prays for the Thessalonians and for us, that as we prepare for Christ's coming, the Lord would **make our love increase and overflow**. That can only happen as we experience God's love for us in Jesus. It can only happen when, as we confess our sins and humble ourselves before God, we see him pouring out his love on us, forgiving our sins, showering us with

blessings that we don't deserve. As we experience God's love we can't help but love him in return. Through the word and sacrament the Holy Spirit moves us to be imitators of God. As he continues to fill us with love, God's love begins to overflow and we demonstrate godly love to others.

Love that overflows toward others shows itself in selflessness. It seeks not its own good, but the good of others. The Apostles point out that this overflowing love from God shows itself in hospitality, in those days it was being willing to take in a fellow Christian that was fleeing from persecution, even if it meant putting yourself at risk. James points out that this overflowing love from God shows itself in a lack of prejudice, not looking down on anyone because they are poor, or judging someone because they are rich, not judging someone by the color of their skin or by their country of origin, but looking upon every Christian as someone who is equally sinful and equally saved by Christ. The overflowing love of the early Christians showed itself in the fact that there were no need persons among them. And Jesus reminds us that our love doesn't just extend to our fellow Christians. He reminds us to bless those who curse us or who persecute us and to pray for our enemies. We are not to seek to get revenge. May the Lord cause his love to overflow in us to each other and everyone else.

Paul's greatest concern for the Thessalonians and for us is that when Jesus comes again we and they will stand before the Father blameless and holy. No one can stand before God blameless and holy on their own merits. The only way we can stand blameless and holy before God on the last day is by having him credit the holiness of Jesus, the one who is the Lord our Righteousness, to our account, and then give Jesus our blame, take our sins off of us and put them on Jesus. That's the gift the Father wants to give us, a gift that is received and held on to through faith alone.

Paul's concern for the Thessalonians and for us, my concern for you, our concern for each other, first and foremost, needs to be that each of us is prepared for Christ's coming. Continue to encourage each other to grow in faith—until we get to heaven there is always something lacking, always room for growth. Continue to marvel at God's love for you so that his love will overflow through you to everyone.