

A LOVE THAT LABORS

By David H. Roper

Series: The Marks of a Maturing Church

I get a great deal of enjoyment out of my children. But I've been awed recently to see how rapidly they are growing. I see their shirt sleeves reaching halfway between their hands and elbows, their pants beginning to look like highwater britches, and I wish I could slow the process down some. (It is a bit expensive to keep them clothed.) But of course this is impossible. Growth is just a natural consequence of life. They are not conscious of their growth. It is simply that, if there are no impediments to growth, such as sickness or malnutrition, life will manifest itself.

If we allow the living presence of Jesus Christ and his life to be manifest, growth will be the normal consequence. Christ will manifest himself in increasing glory if we stay spiritually healthy. But there are some microbes that can invade life and impede the process of growth -- such things as doubt, and fear, and discouragement -- attitudes that arrest our development, stunt our growth and keep us from maturing. It seems to me that the three forces that we have been looking at in I Thessalonians are, basically, the antidote for these problems of doubt and fear and discouragement: they are faith, and love, and hope.

Last week we saw that faith works. Faith is the great principle that makes available to us the mighty resources of God. It is the attitude that frees us for productive activity. All of life is a wasteland unless it is based upon a confidence in God and his ability to express himself through our personalities. Essentially, faith recognizes that God is available to us 24 hours a day to accomplish what he has promised to do. Unless we possess this attitude, all activity is futile and worthless. We are like an accountant who arrives on Monday morning at his office, removes his coat, rolls up his sleeves, and begins to work at his adding machine. He spends the day in feverish activity, and at the end of the day he pulls the lever, tears off the tape, and reads across the bottom, "00000,00", because all day he has been punching the '0' button. Feverish activity without productivity . . . a dead loss! But activity accomplished while resting on the great, majestic life of Jesus Christ is a means or tapping the power of God himself, and it introduces into all our activity a note of reality. It works, things happen, people change, we change. our circumstances change.

This morning we want to turn to the second index of a growing relationship with Jesus Christ, and that is a love that labors—a love that gives itself in service to other people. I picked up a poem at a high school conference several years ago that goes like this:

Steve's girl is rich and haughty;

My girl is poor, but gay.

Steve's girl is young and clever;

My girl looks like a bale of hay.

Steve's girl is smart and clever;

My girl is dumb, but good.

But would I trade my girl for Steve's?

You bet your life I would!

This is the contemporary concept of love. You shift your love to the object that is the most lovable. It is the principle of expediency: you find the easiest thing to love, and devote your time and energy to that object.

But this is hardly God's concept of love. His love is always seen in terms of an attitude of concern for its object, even though there is nothing in the object that would naturally elicit a loving response. In chapter 4, verses 9 and 10, Paul says,

But concerning love of the brethren you have no need to have any one write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do love all the brethren throughout Macedonia.

Paul says you do not need any apostolic instruction on this matter because you have a divine pedagogue. God himself has taught you the quality of true love. By looking at his example, the way he loves, you can see how love should behave. His love is not conditioned by our response to him. It does not seek its own ends; it does not love because its love is returned. It seeks the good of the object without thought of personal cost or consequence. John said, *"This is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins."* That is God's love at work.

This kind of love is an exotic; it is not an inherent trait in man. It is not indigenous. It comes from God. It is God's love transmitted to us. And that is the only way we can have it! We do see touches of this quality of love in the world even in unbelievers. It is the result of what theologians call "common grace" (God sharing enough of himself in the world so that the world is a relatively decent place in which to live). But it is like a stream: the quality of love improves as you get closer to the source. Those of us who are related to God through Jesus Christ have access to the real thing. We have an infinite spring to draw upon. We know that this kind of love is not the normal response, but we discover in Jesus Christ there is a resource there to love unlovable, obnoxious, irritating people like me and like you. The resources are there if we want to tap them.

We want to take a look at an illustration of this kind of love, because an exhortation to love sets up a sympathetic vibration in all of us. We want to be able to love people. Somehow we sense that this is what God expects of us, and we see a world around us that is desperately in need of love. I would like to look at an illustration of love incarnate, love as it is seen in the life of Paul. To get this picture. I would like to have you study with me the second chapter of 1 Thessalonians and observe an authentic love as it is seen in the life of the apostle.

This chapter breaks down into five paragraphs around a device that Paul uses frequently, the repetition of the word, "or" (verses 1, 3, 5, 9 and 11). The word "for," as found in Paul's writings, usually introduces a note of explanation, an illustration of something that he has said before.

Here he seems to be referring back to chapter 1, where he speaks of his first visit to Thessalonica. The readers had seen in his life an illustration of God's love for them, You will note the repetition of the word "know." He is appealing to their own observation of his life as he ministered to them. Paul's authority was always based on his obedience to the spiritual principles he taught, as ours is. It is folly to say, "Don't do what I do; do what I say," because essentially people will look at what we do and they will follow our example. Paul can say look at me. If you want to see an illustration of how one can labor in love and concern for the lives of people around him, look at my life.

In chapter two he gives us a step-by-step enumeration of the characteristics of his life that these people emulated. And, by extension, it is our pattern, as well. The first characteristic (verses 1 and 2) is Paul's *courage*. Paul says,

For you yourselves know, brethren, that our visit to you was not in vain; but though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the face of great opposition.

Paul is not exaggerating when he says. *"we were shamefully treated at Philippi."* Paul, with his companions, Silas and Timothy, had gone into Philippi with the purpose of preaching the gospel there, realizing that this was a key city in their strategy of evangelizing Greece. Philippi was the capital of the region of Macedonia, and a strategic point from the standpoint of the extension of the Gospel. When they arrived they discovered a group of women (evidently wives of Roman soldiers who were quartered in Philippi) who were meeting near the city by a river. For some weeks they met with these women and instructed them from the Scriptures, preaching that Jesus Christ was the Messiah, and many responded.

One day as they were walking down to this place of prayer, they were accosted by a demon-possessed girl who had some occult power that was a source of revenue to her owners. Paul released her from the spirit and the owners lost their income. They were understandably upset and dragged the evangelists before the magistrates of the city of Philippi where they leveled a charge of inciting a riot against them. So, without a trial, Paul and Silas were stripped and beaten, something that would be a grave insult to a Roman citizen. (I think this is why Paul said *"we were shamefully' treated"*) and thrown in prison. In Acts 16 you find this account of the concert at midnight that brought the house down, the earthquake that shook the jail and enabled them to walk out free men, and the jailer who came to know Jesus Christ as a result of his encounter with Paul and Silas. The magistrates later came to the house in order to apologize, then asked them to leave, and escorted them out of town

Paul says this was the way they were treated in Philippi, and they could expect even worse treatment in Thessalonica. As a matter of fact, they were mistreated but he said, *"We wanted to come and preach the gospel because of our love for you."* Their love drove them to set aside their concern for their physical welfare and minister to the needs of these people. They could have kept the gospel under wraps. but they did not. Paul said, *"We came to preach the gospel to you in the face of real opposition."* Here was courage when the normal reaction would be fear. Why? Well, Paul is very specific. Numerous times he reminds them that *"We loved you."* In verse 8 he says

So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.

Later, in chapter 3, verse 12, he prays,

May the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all men, as we do to you.

Paul was willing to set aside his own personal plans, safety, and welfare to seek the best for these people, following the illustration of Christ who said, *"I am come not to be ministered unto, but to minister and to give my life a ransom for many."* It impresses me that love and fear are absolutely incompatible; they cannot exist together. If love is a setting aside of our own goals and ambitions, and thinking in terms of the needs of others, then it sets aside any fear. As Paul says, *"God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a disciplined mind."* And John tells us, *"Perfect love casts out fear."*

I am convinced that each one of us will have opportunities this week to experience this *"love that casts out fear,"* because *"this is our lot."* We may be called upon to face someone's anger or disapproval. We may have an opportunity to share our faith with someone, which is always potentially frightening. I do not know why it is we can talk about the weather, the Warriors, our latest operation, but when it comes to speaking of Christ there is always a moment of panic, our heart begins to pound, and we come apart at the seams. We may have an opportunity to counsel someone. There may be the emotional and physical symptoms of fear, but we discover that when the appointed moment comes, and we draw deeply from his infinite love for this individual, there is his courage to face that situation.

Dr. Dick Hillis recently spoke to our college group, and told us some of his harrowing experiences in Communist China. He spent eighteen months in inland China while the communists were in control. One morning he answered a knock on the door to find a communist officer and twenty soldiers outside. They invited him to accompany them. He did not know what to expect. Several other missionaries of their acquaintance had been taken from their homes, and had never returned. He knew there was a possibility that he

might never see his family again. But he had no choice but to follow the officer. For a period of time he was forced to stand in the cold, waiting for them to interrogate him. Finally he was taken into a little room and for several hours different Chinese officers would come and go, asking him questions. He said that while waiting outside, he began to shake, not so much from the cold as from fear of the consequences, because he did not know what would happen to his family or to him. And there he asked God to give him a concern for these men, to forget himself, and to be able to speak strongly and boldly about Jesus Christ. And, to his amazement, because he said he was not by nature a courageous man, when he walked into the office a great spirit of peace and a poise descended on him. Not once did he feel a flicker of fear. At the end of the interrogations, a big Manchurian officer told him that he was going to be released, but that they had been quite surprised that he had not been afraid. Dr. Hillis said, "Frankly, I'm not afraid." Then the officer reached into his desk and pulled out a revolver. Pointing it at Dr. Hillis' head, he said, "Don't you know that I have the power to blow you into eternity?" And Dr. Hillis said, "Sir, that's all you can do" There was a great spirit of peace, and an opportunity to tell these men of his own faith in Jesus Christ, of courage when you expect the normal reaction to be fear.

I am convinced that the same thing is available to us. We may not have to look down the barrels of Communists' revolvers. but we are going to experience this week opportunities that would normally extract a response of fear from us, but we find that there is courage there to meet that demand, as we draw upon God's strength.

Jeremiah says,

Blessed is the man that trusteth In the Lord, and whose hope the Lord is. For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out her roots by the river, and shall not see when the heat cometh, but her leaf shall be green; and shall not be careful in the year of drought, neither shall cease from yielding fruit. (Jeremiah 17:7-8)

Now I have to ask myself, "What am I trusting in?" If I am looking for the quality of life that will draw men to Jesus Christ, if I am looking for a resource for all of life to meet the demands of my life, I find that the only adequate resource for life is Jesus Christ.

Now I see a second principle in the same verse, and that is *that faith is only as good as its object*. There is no value in faith itself; faith can be misplaced. We can put our confidence in something that has no ultimate power or potency and find that our faith is vain. The force that makes faith work is God's power. Two of our college students are licensed private pilots. They haven't asked me yet, but someday they are going to ask me to go up and take a spin. Let us imagine that we have set a date, and on the appointed day I go to the airport to meet them. They roll back the hangar doors and one says, "Well, there it is!" And there is this bi-plane of World War I vintage, with one wing drooping and a flat tire, held together by a couple turns of baling wire and bubble gum, and he says, "Isn't that a beauty?" I say, "Frankly, it looks like a piece of junk to me." He says, "No, it's really a very stable craft. Help me push it out." So we push it out on the runway and he says, "All right, are you ready to fly?" I say, "Well, no, I think I'm going to stay on the ground." And he says, "What's the matter, don't you have any faith?" I say, "Well, sure, I have faith in you, but I don't have any faith in that plane. And to go up in that plane wouldn't be any expression of faith, it would be sheer stupidity!" I think this is the point that Paul is making, that faith of itself is of no consequence. Faith has to be resting upon an object that is valid and worthwhile.

Now what do we know about God? I wish we had time to really go into this in depth, because the book of I Thessalonians itself is a study in the character of God. I would commend this to you on your own, to read what Paul says about God and what he does and what he is. But we don't have to go far because Paul picks up the point immediately in this verse (verse 9). He says first "*you turned from idols to serve a living God.*" We serve a living God who is alert and available and active in the world. living today in power and accessible to each one of us. Secondly, Paul says that we serve true God. If God is not true, whom else can we trust? The Scriptures tell us that he is absolutely faithful. Paul writes to Titus on another occasion and refers him to the "*God who cannot lie.*" God never misleads us; he always loves us enough to tell us the truth. He is absolutely faithful. At the end of this book, in chapter 5, verse 23, Paul says,

May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and

body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

There is a process at stake. God is building into every life the qualities of life that we are looking for. He is equipping us to be what we were intended to be, men and women who are totally available to God, to be his instruments in the world. He has called us to this and Paul says that God is faithful to *do* it. We can trust him. He is bound by his own word.

Then in verse 10 of chapter 1, Paul goes on to point out that they turned from idols to God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, *whom he raised from the dead*. He has the power of a resurrection life in his hands. There are other things we could say about God. Obviously this does not exhaust his character, but it does give us a glimpse of the One who is the object of our faith and why our faith is valid. God himself is worthy of our commitment and our trust.

There is a third principle of faith I see in chapter 2. verse 13.

And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers [or, literally, "you men of faith"]

He said that when Paul came to Thessalonica and preached Jesus Christ, they accepted it without argument. This indicates another principle of faith. *Faith*, basically, *is taking God at his word*. Faith is the stance that we take on his authority. It is the determination to do what he says without quibbling, without second-guessing, without trying to be a Monday morning quarterback, without accepting our analysis of circumstances. Just doing what he asks us to do.

There are so many illustrations of this in the Scriptures. I recently ran across one in the twenty-seventh chapter of Acts, in the account of Paul's journey aboard ship to Rome; As they were en route~a storm came up and the mariners began to panic and prepared to abandon ship. In verse 22 Paul speaks to them, Men, you should have listened to me, and should not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss. I now bid you take heart; for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For this very night there stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, *"Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and lo, God has granted you all those who sail with you."* So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told.

"I have faith in God that it will be exactly as/have been told."

Now that is what faith is all about; a tenacious, unremitting hold on God's word, a sturdy determination to believe God despite outward circumstances.

Now the thing that comes to mind is, what do we think about his promises when we face the daily round of problems in which all of us are involved? How do we react when things begin to run against us; when the dishwasher breaks down, the kids have chicken pox, the income tax is due and undone, and the house is a mess? In the face of this, can we remember the firm word of Scripture, *"My God is able to meet your needs according to his riches in glory through Christ Jesus."* Because that is where faith has to work, right down in the daily problems of life. Taking God's word and applying it to a specific situation and holding on to it no matter what circumstances tell us. How do we react in a hostile world, in an office or on a campus. where we are called upon to lift up Jesus Christ? The word of Scripture is, *"Take no thought how or what you should speak; for it shall be given you in: that same hour what you shall speak."* Or Isaiah's words, *"The Lord God hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I might know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary."* We discover that, by stepping out on those promises, the ground proves firm. We are secure. God has not misled us. By placing *our* confidence in him we discover that he is really adequate for everything that he says he is going to do. Or we have an impossible assignment to face, a workload that demands more in terms of time or energy than we could ever accomplish. Paul writes, *"God is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we could ever ask or think."* Or that *"we are more than conquerors through him that loved us."* Now this is God speaking. These are his promises. And when we see our problems against the backdrop of

these promises, they become very inconsequential. That is how faith behaves, it takes God at his word. I suppose Abraham is the classic example. He was in his nineties; the Scriptures say his body was as good as dead, but God says, "*Abraham, you're going to have a son, and through this seed I am going to make a great nation.*" The translation obscures a bit of Abraham's answer, but essentially, what he said was, "Amen. [believe it, so be it. let's get on with it, Lord." This is how faith responds. It simply takes God at his word.

Chapter three adds another dimension to faith. *Tests reveal the quality of our faith.* Faith shows its true colors under pressure. But I would like to move through this to the activity of faith. We have looked at the attitude of faith and have seen some description of a valid faith, but now, just what does faith do? Faith produces works. Faith is valid because it is productive. I am firmly convinced that any activity in the world that is grounded in a confidence upon God is going to be significant. It may not look good in terms of the world's evaluation, but in terms of eternity and God's purposes in the world, it is intensely significant.

During the Vietnam war era, I talked with a young man at a local university who was manning a "peace table" in front of the Student Center. I asked him something of his program, and the particular group with which he was associated, and what they were doing about the world situation. (We both had to admit that the world is in bad shape.) He began to list some of the activities that they were engaged in, the sort of thing that we have come to associate with passive resistance. As [I was listening, the Lord brought to mind a statement in the book of Hebrews and [I drew out my New Testament and read these words in chapter 11, verse 32:

And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets -- who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

As I read this to the student, I am sure it did not impress him at all, but it suddenly impressed me intensely with the fact that it is in the very areas today where we see the most strife and turmoil and struggles of men against men that faith can be brought to bear. I saw that faith is the answer to every problem the world is facing. Not that this involves inactivity on our part, because God may call us to become personally involved in repressing some of the world's ills. But I saw that any activity that is resting upon a concerned, Omnipotent God, is going to produce lasting results, because it is a means of tapping the resources of an infinite Lord and bringing them to bear on specific problems that we have to face.

Now this is true of matters of worldwide import; it is also true of the most personal and intimate problems of our life. Faith is the means of moving men and changing circumstances and changing ourselves through God. We can take just one area of our lives that is troubling us. We can begin to ask God to move in that area to change our lives, to change our activities, make us the kind of men and women that we want to be, and we will discover that he will do it. Faith really works.

King David's life so beautifully exemplifies the Christian experience. The story of David's encounter with Goliath is a fine illustration of faith and how it may move out against insuperable odds with seemingly inadequate resources. But the thing that perplexed me when I first began to study his life was why David picked five stones for his sling when he stopped at the brook on his way to encounter Goliath. I am convinced that the Scriptures never just use words -- the number of stones had to be significant -- but the longer I pondered the more perplexed I became. Why five stones? There was only one giant, and it seemed to me to be a flaw in his faith. Did he think he was going to miss and that he would have four more chances? Some time later I was reading in II Samuel, and I got the answer. Goliath had four sons, and so there were five giants. And so in David's reckoning there was one stone per giant! Now this is what I mean about being specific in our faith.

What is your giant, what is mine? We discover that faith will work, right there in the very specific problems that we have to face. "*Faith is the victory,*" the Scriptures say, "*that overcomes the world.*"

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I Thessalonians
Second Message
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