**1 Thessalonians 1:1-3**

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**The Three Greatest Christian Virtues**

***1 Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace. 2 We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; 3 constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father,***

* Last week we began our study of this first letter to the Thessalonians by examining the background, context and purpose of the letter.
	+ Having been prematurely driven from the region of Macedonia by the persecuting Jews, Paul was not able to teach and establish the churches in the region to the depth he wanted to. But, as we see in other passages of the book of Acts, Paul’s desires and timetable for events were not the same as God’s.
	+ In the introduction last week we saw that God prohibited Paul from preaching in Asia. Instead, he was directed, by the Spirit, into Macedonia.
	+ Then, arriving in Macedonia . . . and after having seen many receive faith and having planted churches in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea . . . Paul is persecuted and driven out of Macedonia well before he wanted.
* You can imagine that as he was suffering at the hands of his persecutors and being driven from city to city that Paul was praying that God would allow him more time to establish these new churches. But it was not to be.
	+ So, being driven from the region by the jealous Jews, Paul could only pray that God would watch over and protect the brand new Christians that he was forced to leave behind in each city.
	+ Though Paul did not know why, God did not permit him to linger very long in the cities of Macedonia.
	+ But, although Paul was not allowed to remain in Macedonia, his faithful companions . . . Silvanus and Timothy . . . were permitted to remain. And it was, in large part, due to their efforts, that the churches in Macedonia were firmly established and were growing to maturity.
* It is upon being reunited with Paul in Corinth and hearing the positive report of the churches in Macedonia that Paul’s heart is encouraged as he gladly receives the good news of God’s protection of the Macedonians.
* Now, in response to the report he has received from Silvanus and Timothy, Paul writes to encourage and instruct the faithful in Thessalonica.

**Salutation**

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***v. 1— Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.***

* Paul opens this letter with the following salutation— ***Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.***
* Here, in the opening statement of the letter, we have a very traditional greeting employed by Paul in which he identifies the writers, the recipients of the letter, and a brief greeting.
	+ All of Paul’s epistles begin in this way. It was the normal convention in Greek society at the time.
* But Paul’s identification of the writers of the letter . . . himself, Silvanus and Timothy . . . is unique. This three-fold identification of the writers is found only twice . . . in both the letters to the Thessalonians.
	+ This inclusion of Silvanus and Timothy in the greeting is to be expected since both men were very important in the formation and guidance of the churches in Macedonia.
* The only other times were find Paul including anyone else in the greetings of a letter are found in Philippians, Colossians and Philemon, where Paul includes Timothy in the salutation.
* It is also significant that while most of Paul’s letters begin with him asserting his authority **an apostle of Jesus Christ**, Paul does not do so in his two letters to the Thessalonians, nor in his letter to the Philippians.
	+ Because his letters to the Thessalonians and the Philippians were letters of commendation and encouragement . . . and because the faithful in Thessalonica and Philippi knew Paul well . . . Paul did not feel it necessary to exert his apostolic authority in addressing them. **He was writing to these churches not only as their spiritual leader, but as their friend.**

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**2 Important Distinctions**

* In stating that he is writing ***to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ***, Paul makes **two important distinctions** about his readers.
* **First**, Paul refers to his readers as ***the church of the Thessalonians***.
	+ The term ***church*** is the Greek word *ekklēsia*, from the words *ek*, meaning “from” or “out of,” and the word *kaleō*, meaning “to call.”
		- Literally, the word *ekklēsia* means “to call out from.”
	+ In the Greek culture the term *ekklēsia* simply referred to “an assembly of the citizens of a town” when called to conduct public business.
	+ To the Jews, the term *ekklēsia* was a religious term that meant “the assembled people of God.”
	+ It is this second meaning . . . “the assembled people of God” . . . that Paul intends by his use of the term.
* **Secondly** . . . and significantly . . . unlike the Jews, who believed in Yahweh as God, **but rejected Jesus Christ as their Messiah**, Paul identifies ***the church of the Thessalonians*** as being “the assembled people of God” who believe in both ***God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.***
	+ Many of the new believers were Gentiles who had rejected paganism and had **first** turned to the Jews to learn about God in the Jewish synagogue. But when Paul preached Jesus Christ as the Son of God in the synagogues, they believed the gospel message and **then left** the synagogues to become followers of Jesus Christ.

**Paul’s unique and very personal greeting**

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***. . . grace to you and peace***

* Then, having identified his readers, **Paul then issues the greeting that he proclaims in all 13 of his New Testament letters . . . *grace to you and peace***.
	+ This is the only letter in which Paul uses a more abbreviated form of this greeting. In his other 12 letters Paul uses the more lengthy greeting, ***grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.***
* It is important to understand that this greeting by Paul is very much more than a perfunctory greeting.
	+ With this greeting Paul very concisely states **the transaction** and **the result** of receiving saving faith.
	+ The process of **salvation first begins** with the divine action of God . . . He extends ***grace*** to us. Then, having received salvation by grace, we are transformed from being in a state of enmity with God . . . His enemy . . . to a state of ***peace*** with God.
	+ I will speak more on this divine transaction next week . . . .

**1 Thess. 1:2-10—Exhortation**

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***2 We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers;***

* Following his salutation, Paul then begins the body of his letter.
	+ As I said in my introduction last week, this letter can be broken into three distinct parts . . . **exhortation, defense and instruction**.
* Having been prematurely separated from them by the persecution of the Jews in Thessalonica, and having gone months without word of their condition, Paul is greatly relieved and gratified to hear that the saints in Thessalonica were flourishing.
	+ For the remainder of chapter 1 of this letter Paul his great love for the believers in Thessalonica by pouring out in his profession of love and encouragement to them.
	+ In v. 2 Paul begins by writing . . . ***We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers***.
* Even though this is a letter originated by Paul, he includes Silvanus and Timothy as co-authors and writes on their behalf.
	+ The fact that **Paul uses** **the plural pronouns “we” and “our” 24 times in this letter** is evidence that the three men are speaking to their dear friends with one voice.
* The personal affection that Paul, Silvanus and Timothy have for the saints in Thessalonica is obvious as Paul writes that ***we give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers***.
* Despite the fact that they were far away, Paul wanted his friends in Thessalonica to know that they were near in his heart and prayers.

**The Grounds For Paul’s Thanksgiving**

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**v. 3—their Christian virtues**

**v. 4-7— their divine election**

**v. 8-10— reports concerning them**

* In this first chapter of the letter Paul expresses his thanksgiving in three specific areas.
	+ First, in v. 3, Paul expresses his gratitude for the demonstration of their Christian virtues.
	+ Second, in v. 4-7, Paul expresses his thanks for God’s choice in giving them salvation.
	+ Third, in v. 8-10, Paul expresses his thanks for the positive reports that he has heard concerning them.
* This morning we will examine the first of these three grounds for Paul’s thankfulness . . . the Christian virtues the Thessalonian believers have displayed.

**The 3 Great Christian Virtues on Display**

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***v. 3— constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father***

* Having declared his commitment to unceasing prayers on their behalf, Paul then makes a statement in v. 3 that indicates his personal knowledge of their growing spiritual maturity. Paul commends the Thessalonians . . . ***constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father***.
* Notice here in v. 3 that Paul lists what are considered **the three greatest Christian virtues . . . *faith, love and hope*.**
* If these three virtues are familiar, they should be. They are the same three great virtues that most of us are well familiar with, found in 1 Corinthians 13:13, which says . . .

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***1 Corinthians 13:13— But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.***

* But notice in 1 Thessalonians 1:3 that the order of these three virtues is different from 1 Corinthians 13:13. Here, in 1 Thessalonians, the order is ***faith love and hope***. **Why the difference? Is it even significant?**
	+ I believe that there is a good reason for the different word order. As we examine the significance of each of these virtues, **it seems that the word order in our passage today emphasizes the sequence in which these three virtues are manifested in the life of every believer.**

**Step 1—Working out your salvation**

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***v. 3— constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father***

* Paul begins in v. 3 by exhorting the Thessalonians to ***constantly bear in mind your*** ***work of faith***. Paul doesn’t call for them to merely **“remember your faith.”** Paul calls for them to **remember their *work of faith***.
* What does one’s ***work of faith*** refer to? It refers to the fact that **work is produced by faith**. The fruit of one’s faith is the **“work” or activity that faith inspires or springs from, and is motivated or activated by faith**.
* This same theme of faith producing good works is found elsewhere in Philippians 2:12, when Paul exhorts the Philippian church in the same way. Paul exhorts the Philippians, saying . . .

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***Philippians 2:12-13— 12 So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; 13 for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.***

* Likewise, in James 2:17-18 we see the same theme regarding works of faith . . .

***James 2:17-18— 17 Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. 18 But someone may well say, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works."***

* The point that these passages make is that **good works that are done as an outworking of one’s faith and are the fruit of the Spirit being manifested in you.**
	+ In fact, we learn in Scripture that the ***works of faith*** that we perform are ordained by God . . . that God gives us works to perform, and we respond in faith by doing those things which God has ordained. We see this explicitly stated in Ephesians 2:10 . . .

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***Ephesians 2:10— For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.***

* + The good works that we do are done as a response of faith. Nevertheless, despite the fact that God has ordained them, **we don’t know in advance that a task has been ordained for us by God. We only know that we see a task that needs doing and that the Holy Spirit is leading us to perform that task.**

**Step 2—Laboring in Love**

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***v. 3— constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father***

* The second great Christian virtue is found in Paul’s next exhortation as he calls them to **constantly remember their *labor of love***.
	+ The fact that their ***love*** is described as ***labor*** is an acknowledgement that true ***labor*** is physically tiresome. ***Labor***, by definition, in strenuous activity that causes fatigue and exhaustion.
		- ***Labor*** is not easy. It is hard work.
	+ But unlike the ***labor*** of unbelievers, who find their labor to be unpleasant and burdensome, Christians who ***labor*** for one another, ***in love***, find that while their labor does bring about fatigue, it is a fatigue that is **rewarding and pleasant**.
* As a consequence, as we learn here in v. 3, one’s ***labor of love*** is the result of one’s ***work of faith***.
	+ **Without faith, labor is burdensome. But with true faith, labor is borne happily because the object of our labor is our love of one another.**
* The importance of ***laboring in love*** is the theme of 1 Corinthians 13. Sandwiched in the middle of 3 chapters on the subject of **spiritual gifts**, **Paul’s point in 1 Corinthians 13 is that if one’s spiritual gifts are used selfishly and without love toward one another, one’s gifts are wasted.** To be used properly, spiritual gifts must be exercised **in love toward others, not for selfish reasons or motives.**

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**Step 3— Remaining Steadfast in Hope**

***v. 3— constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father***

* The final virtue in Paul’s exhortation to the Thessalonians is found in his call for them to **constantly remember their *steadfastness of hope***.
* The word ***hope*** is an important word in Scripture, appearing often. But biblical ***hope*** is not the same as secular **hope**. The world defines hope as “a desire of something good, accompanied by at least a slight expectation of obtaining it.” Notice in the secular definition that there is only a **slight** expectation that the thing hoped for will actually occur . . . like hoping the Braves will win the World Series next season. There’s not much of an expectation that this will actually occur, but . . . as the world likes to say . . . “there’s always hope.”
	+ On the other hand, the Bible defines **hope** as **“a confident expectation in the thing hoped for.”** In other words, **biblical hope is the belief that the thing hoped for will certainly come to pass.**

**The Object and Source of our Hope**

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***v. 3— constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father***

* **Why the difference between secular hope and biblical hope?** Simply stated, biblical hope is not based in ourselves or in our own power. Biblical hope is based upon our confidence in **the power of God based upon the confidence that comes from our faith**. **It is the confidence of our faith that makes our hope steadfast and immovable.**
* As Paul states in our passage today . . . here in v. 3 . . . **the object and source of our *steadfastness of hope*** is ***in our Lord Jesus Christ* [who is] *in the presence of our God and Father***.
	+ In other words, our ***steadfast hope*** is not based upon anything we have done. Our ***steadfastness of hope*** is born out of the ***faith*** that each of us receives from the Holy Spirit . . . the confident expectation that Jesus Christ will fulfill all the promises that He has made to us.
	+ This ***steadfastness of hope*** is what Paul is referring to in Colossians 1:27 when he declares Jesus Christ as the source of our hope . . . ***Christ in you, the hope of glory***.

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* + And the thing that we have ***hope*** in is specifically stated by Paul in Titus 1:2. . . ***the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago***.
		- There, in that statement, we have the explicit reason why we have the **steadfast hope of eternal life with God . . . because *God, who cannot lie, promised it long ages ago****.*
	+ The source of our ***steadfast hope* of eternal life is our knowledge and confidence that God will fulfill His promise of eternal life to all who believe His Son as their Savior**.

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**The difference between 1 Thessalonians 1:3 and 1 Corinthians 13:13**

* A few minutes ago I pointed out that the order of these great Christian virtues is different from 1 Corinthians 13:13.
	+ In 1 Corinthians 13:13 Paul’s focus is on the virtue of ***love***, as it applies to the exercise of spiritual gifts.
* While **Paul’s focus in 1 Corinthians 13 is on the need to exercise our spiritual gifts in love, for the benefit of others, his focus here in 1 Thessalonians 1:3 is on the chronological sequence in which these three great Christian virtues occur in the lives of every believer.**
	+ Our life as Christians begins when we receive ***faith***. And, having **first** received ***faith***, we **then** begin to demonstrate the fruit of that faith by our **works of faith**.
	+ And the works of our faith result in the **continued** ***labor of love*** that we exert on behalf of our brethren.
	+ And both our ***works of faith*** and ***labor of love*** are born along by our ***steadfast hope*** in eternal life that God has promised us.
		- **In other words**, we do work that is evidence of salvation . . . we ***labor*** hard, in ***love***, as the continued result of salvation . . . and we gladly do these things because of the ***steadfast hope*** that we have in our salvation.
	+ If any one of these virtues is missing . . . if we do not have genuine ***faith***, if we do not ***love*** the brethren, or if we do not have ***steadfast hope*** . . . the ***works of faith*** and ***labor of love*** never get started **or** becomes so burdensome that we quit.
	+ All three of these virtues are required for the true Christian to persevere in laboring for the Lord to accomplish the ***good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them***.

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**Unfortunately, not all Christians *labor in love***

* One of the things I have observed over the years is the fact that in any human group **a minority of the people end up doing a majority of the work.**
	+ This fact is true in secular society as well as within the church. Some people do more work than others. It seems that the same people are usually the first to step forward to serve, while the same reluctant others are usually the last.
* This was the problem that Paul was addressing in 1 Corinthians 13. People in the Corinthian church desired spiritual gifts for the wrong reasons. They wanted spiritual gifts to serve themselves or glorify themselves. They had selfish and self-serving motives. We see this in Paul’s rebuke in the first two verses of 1 Corinthians 13 . . .

***1 Corinthians 13:1-2— 1 If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.***

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* + Paul’s point in 1 Corinthians 13 is that the Corinthians were not serving one another with their spiritual gifts, they were serving and glorifying themselves.
	+ We must remember that when we ***labor in love*** that we are not working for ourselves. The ***works of faith*** that we perform are done, **primarily**, in service and obedience **to the Lord**, and, **secondarily**, in service **to one another**.
* But, happily, here in 1 Thessalonians 1:3 we see that Paul is commending the Thessalonians because they were properly demonstrating Christ-likeness by serving one another.
* This morning we have examined the first of three reasons the apostle Paul, Silvanus and Timothy were thankful for God’s work in the Thessalonian church . . . the evidence of their salvation by their ***works of faith***, their ***labors of love*** and their ***steadfast hope***.
* Next week we will examine their next reason for Paul’s gratitude . . . thanks to God for His divine election of the Thessalonian believers.