

Two Characteristics of a Healthy Church
2 Thessalonians 1:3-4
Tim Becker
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1. Introduction

What would be a godly boast for a church? If a God-centered person would look at First Baptist and thank God for something specific, what would we hope it would be? If a godly person would look at First Baptist and then boast about us to other churches, what would we hope the boast would be about? If you would say, “I believe our church is healthy because _____.” What would you say in the because?

The apostle Paul did these. He looked at a church, thanked God for something there, and boasted to other churches about something in that church. For what?

Why would we want to know? The focus of Paul’s thanks to God and his boast tells us characteristics of a healthy church. Are we a healthy church? If we want to be, what do we need to focus on?

Please turn with me to 2 Thess 1:3-4 (p. 989 in the pew Bible) so we can see what Paul and God consider two characteristics of a healthy church.

Read 2 Thess 1:3-4.

Please pray with me.

* Pray

God in heaven, you sent your Son to give birth to your church, his bride. We want to be a church that follows not our own values, but yours. Teach us this morning from your word so that we can aim ourselves to your will individually and together as a church. In Jesus name, we pray. Amen.

2. The center (ground) of the passage is the faith and love of the church.

Please take a closer look at this passage with me. It is on this slide on the screen [*Slide: 2 Thess 1:3-4 with 3 boxes*]. The structure of the paragraph divides into 3 parts. *Read it*. Now, what is Paul’s logic as he writes this? The clues are in the words “because” at the beginning of the 2nd box and “therefore” at the beginning of the 3rd box.

On this next slide [*Slide: 2 Thess 1:3-4 with labels beside the boxes*] I made Paul’s logic explicit with my own notes on the left of the text boxes. The text in box 2 is the foundation for what Paul says in boxes 1 and 3. Let’s look at box 1. Why ought Paul give God thanks for the Thessalonian brothers? Because their faith is growing abundantly and the love of every one for one another is increasing. Now let’s look at box 3. Why does Paul boast about the Thessalonian church when he

speaks with other churches? Because their faith is growing abundantly and the love of every one for one another is increasing.

What I want you to see is that the foundation or the center of these 2 verses is in box 2. Paul is thanking God and boasting about this church because their faith is growing abundantly and the love of every one of them for one another is increasing. This is the most important point of these 2 verses: the growing faith and increasing love in this church.

What do you thank God for? What do you boast about or praise to others? The answer to both of these is the same. We are thankful for the things that matter to us. We praise the things we value. And the more we value a thing, the more we tell others how wonderful it is. So surely we are learning something about Paul here. He is thanking God for this church's faith and love because faith and love are things he values highly. Paul is boasting about the faith and love of this church to others because this is the heart of what Paul hopes for in a church.

When you think of First Baptist, for what are you most thankful to God? When you tell others about our church, what are you especially wanting to tell them? I'm guessing that many of us would not have said faith in God and love of others. We might mention the worship on Sunday morning or the friendliness of others or the new building. These are good, but why don't we so quickly think of growing faith and increasing love? Perhaps we assume faith and love in our midst and so they aren't on our radar. Obviously, they are on Paul's radar. They should be on ours too.

For many of us, a passage on faith in God and love for others won't be a new idea. This might tempt you to think this passage has nothing to tell you. You would be wrong about that. God's word always has something to tell us, even when it is a passage we think we already know. Why? Because knowing the word of God and seeing that word formed in our life are two different things. Ask yourself, do I see in my church and in me faith that is growing abundantly and love for one another that is increasing? Lean forward with me. We need this word for us.

3. Faith in God

Faith in God: what is it? How do you recognize it?

If we want to be a group of people who are growing abundantly in faith, then we must know what faith is or we'll miss the mark. Faith is complete trust. Faith is confidence. In what? That's important. Faith must have an object. It's common today to teach people to have confidence in themselves. That would be faith in yourself. Some of us have faith or trust in our government or our bank or our parents or our car mechanic or our surgeon. Do you see how faith can have many different objects? This isn't the kind of faith Paul is commending to the Thessalonians. Paul is thanking God that the people in this church have faith in God.

When we say we have faith or trust in something, we ought to ask ourselves just what it is we are trusting to happen. Faith not only has an object, but it has a what. Faith for what. If you have faith in your car mechanic, you probably mean that you have faith that your mechanic can fix

your car, not that he can cure your cancer. If you have faith in your surgeon, you probably mean that you have faith that your surgeon has the knowledge and skills to correct your health problem, not that he can manage your retirement finances.

What do we mean when we say we have faith in God? Faith for what? People have lots of ideas, even convictions, about that. Some have faith in God that they won't be laid off at work. Or that their marriage won't end in divorce. Or that their loved one won't die of cancer. Or that their children will be saved. These are all serious desires, serious hopes for faith in God. But we must not connect the object of our faith with just any what? Having faith in your surgeon to fix your car doesn't make sense. That is not something your surgeon can deliver. And if you would ask him, he would tell you that.

So for what should we have faith in God? We should ask him. God, what should we have faith in you for? [Slide]. Look with me at one of God's answers in Hebrews 11:6.

Hebrews 11:6 "And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him."

The point of this verse is that in order to please God, a person must have faith in God. This is true and very important, but we want to learn about the what of that faith. What does God say we can believe about God? Two things: that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

It takes faith to believe that God exists. Why? Because we can't see him standing right in front of us. If you could see him directly, then believing that God exists wouldn't require faith. Faith is not the same as sight. If you are sitting next to your mom and dad right now, you don't need faith to believe that. You can see it. But if God is in this room watching every person, it takes faith to believe that because you cannot see him doing that. From the words in Heb 11:6, God is telling you that you can believe that he exists, and that you must believe this if you want to please him.

From Heb 11:6, we also see that we can, and must, believe that God rewards those who seek him. What is a reward? If your dad tells you that there will be a reward before bed tonight for all who finish their supper, what are you thinking? That the reward will be bad? No! If you are in my family, you would be thinking ice cream, a great reward. When God tells us that he will reward those who seek him, don't think the reward will be bad or something you don't care about. Think it will be as good as ice cream ... times a billion. Friends, because you don't yet see the reward from God, it takes faith to believe that your seeking God will be worth it. But you can bank on it. God will surely richly reward those who seek him. In many places in the Old and New Testament God tells us about the reward and assures us it is coming and that it will be the best thing you will ever receive.

Faith in God is believing that God is doing us good, even when we don't see that good. When God promised Abraham that he would have offspring as many as the stars of the sky, how many children did Abraham have at that point? None. And how old was Abraham and his wife Sarah? Too old for their bodies to produce children. And how long had they been married with no children? Long enough to know that they were barren ... that their bodies were not capable of producing children. And so what could Abraham see of God's promise? Nothing. Did it look likely that God's promise was even possible? Not at all. And now for the key question. What did Abraham think when God made this promise to him? Abraham believed God rather than

believed what he could see. Faith in God is believing that God is doing us good, even when we don't see that good.

Here's the thing. God hasn't promised all of us children or long life or a marriage that will never shatter or children who will be saved or a body free from cancer. God has promised those who seek him that they will have forgiveness of their sins (Eph 1:7), peace with God (Rom 5:1), new bodies someday without sickness or disease or worn out parts (2 Cor 5:1), a future with no tears, death, mourning, crying, nor pain (Rev 21:4), a future where God himself will dwell with them (Rev 21:3), a new heaven and new earth where everything works perfectly (Rev 21:1), pleasures forevermore (Ps 16:11). The great reward that God offers all who seek him is salvation from God's wrath because of our sins and a glorious life forever with God.

Those rewards come to those who seek God in faith. This means seeking God as he really is, not the God of our wishes. We find out who God really is by reading what he tells us in the Scriptures. Only those who are repenters of their sins and trusters in Jesus Christ on the cross have saving faith and get the reward.

I hope that at this point you are reflecting on your own faith in God. I hope you are not seeing faith as a static I-got-it or I-don't. You and I won't have a faith that is "growing abundantly" (Paul's words) if you have a settle-it-and-forget-it kind of faith. Life's challenges always challenge our faith in God. If you don't deal with that as it comes, you won't have a growing faith, but a withering faith.

I want greater faith in God for me and for my children and for you, my brothers and sisters at First Baptist. If you want that for yourself, is there anything you can do to stimulate your faith so that it grows? Yes! Your faith in God will grow as you know him more and as you see your life from his view. How do you do that? Be assured that God has provided means by which you can know him and by which you can have your sight changed. Your job is to put yourself under the influence of those means. What they?

First, pray. Ask God to increase your faith in him. Ask him to open your eyes to see what a sure hope he is for all who humbly seek him. Ask him to send his Holy Spirit to fill you with himself so that you will have the mind of Christ instead of your sin-tainted mind. This isn't a prayer to pray once, but to pray over and over, as often as you sense your need for God's help, which of course is every day.

A second means that God has provided to increase your faith in him is to put yourself under the fountain of God's word. God wrote a book to tell us about himself and to tell us how we should interpret our lives. If you ask God to show you himself, but don't read his book, this wouldn't make sense. How do you put yourself under the fountain of His word? By reading it with an attitude of a hungry soul coming to Thanksgiving dinner. Man does not live by bread alone, Jesus said, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. God ensured that those words are recorded for us in the Scriptures. We also put ourselves under the fountain of God's word, by memorizing it, not like a robot, but by turning it over and over in your mind, meditating on it. By listening to Bible-saturated preaching, not absent-mindedly enduring it, but actively attending to it as words of life from God to you. By studying the Bible, as a person who is sure

there is gold for your soul to be found for the one who works to dig it out. If you want growing faith, you must put yourself under the influence of God's word, over and over again. Come to adult Sunday school. Keep coming to hear God's word preached. Start a Bible reading plan and a Bible memorization plan. Don't listen to your inner self tell you these are worthless or out of reach for you.

The third means of growing your faith in God is for you to move your eyes off earthly prizes and onto the heavenly prize. When I say move your eyes, I mean the eyes of your heart. I mean the eye of your desire. The first 2 means are necessary for this: pray asking God to change your desires and read God's word so your desires will be shaped by him more than the Black Friday store flyers. Tell yourself the truth that your earthly prizes are temporary, while the heavenly prize is eternal. Tell yourself, "It is a better deal for me to lose all now in order to gain God's eternal reward, than it is to gain all now and lose God's eternal reward." And it's a lie from hell that you can have both.

[Slide.] 1 John 2:15–17 ¹⁵ Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. ¹⁷ And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

Ask God to help you believe this. And ask him to help you live out what you believe.

If you do not fight to move your eyes off earthly prizes and onto the heavenly prize, your faith in God will wither. It will be a Sunday-morning-only kind of faith that will have no power to hold you fast to God when trials come.

* Summary

So where are we? 2 Thessalonians 1:3-4 encourages us to be a church and a people whose faith is growing abundantly. Faith is not static, but growing or withering. To be growing, you need God's help and you need to put yourself in the path of that help: prayer, Bible, and eyes on the heavenly reward.

4. Love for others

The second thing that 2 Thess 1:3-4 encourages is for us to be a church where everyone's love for one another is increasing.

What kind of love is Paul talking about? To see, please look with me at 1 John 4:10-11 [Slide].

1 John 4:10–11 ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

When John says, "in this is love," he means this is what love looks like. He's pointing to something and saying that that something is what love looks like. So what is he pointing to? What does love look like? It looks like God's Son offering his life on the cross to remove God's

wrath toward us because of our sins. You and I and everyone on the planet are willing determined sinners against a holy God. God is right and just to punish us for our rebellion against him. That punishment is eternal separation from himself and from all that is good and lovely, in hell. God made a way for him to be both just and merciful. He did that not by lowering his standard of justice, but by himself paying the price that justice demands. God's Son became a man, lived a perfect sinless life, and died for the sins of men. When Jesus was dying on the cross, God was pouring upon him all the wrath for sins that we deserved. Imagine the agony: the physical pain and the relational separation from the Father as God turned his face away from his Son.

If you are unimpressed with this, you are underestimating something: the wicked stench of your sins, the rightness of justice, the extreme penalty paid by the Son. When you weigh the cross rightly, you will see love. Christ dying on the cross in our place is the ultimate picture of love. This is what John says, "in this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins."

John's point doesn't stop with how impressive God's love for us is. He goes on to tie it to our love for each other. "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

From these verses, Paul David Tripp writes a definition of love. *[Slide.]* "Love is willing self-sacrifice for the good of another that does not require reciprocation or that the person being loved is deserving." *Say it again.*

Willing, not resentful. Self-sacrifice, not self-interest. For the good of another, not for the good of yourself. That does not require reciprocation, not I'll scratch your back if you'll scratch mine. And does not require that the person being loved is deserving, not waiting for them to be worthy of your love. "Love is willing self-sacrifice for the good of another that does not require reciprocation or that the person being loved is deserving."

As you think about loving others in this church, how does this definition strike you? What a high bar for love, right? I'm intimidated by this definition. Are you? You and I are tempted to have an easy and low-cost kind of love for others in church. Do you know what I mean by that? I mean the kind that has warm feelings toward others, that gives others a pleasant smile and hello on Sunday morning, but doesn't venture much deeper. This is politeness. Politeness is part of love, but it's not deep love. Politeness alone isn't a love that models itself on God's love for us. God goes much deeper than being polite with us.

What does this love look like in the church? I can't help but think of Jesus' command to love our neighbor as we love ourselves (Mt 22:39). This kind of love would be polite with others and yet do more. Hospitality is a wonderful way to express love to others. Ask someone over to your home for a meal or to play a game or to enjoy dessert or a camp fire or ... anything that your family enjoys doing. We had friends in NY who had a family tradition of celebrating advent on each of the Sunday evenings before Christmas. They would invite a different family to join them for each of those Sundays. Fabulous idea! We lit advent candles with the children, did some singing and reading and when it was over, we enjoyed Christmas cookies and conversation. How simple. How loving of them to enfold our family into theirs for a couple of hours.

When you invite someone over, be interested in who they are, in their past and in how they are doing now. Ask them questions, not like a court lawyer, but like a kind interested friend. Love befriends. Don't worry so much about the food being fancy enough or the house being clean enough. It's okay to serve hotdogs or soup or use paper plates ... the point is to love through hospitality, not impress through immaculate homemaking. We are being deceived by sin when we make hospitality about impressing others with ourselves.

Love helps when a car needs jumped. Love pitches in with meals when a new baby arrives. Love serves in the church nursery. Some of you are no longer able to help with these kinds of things. How can you love others in the body of Christ? Can you write an encouragement note? Can you pray for another and tell them you are doing that? Can you make a phone call just to ask how they are doing? Again, for all these practical ways to love, think willing self-sacrifice for the good of another that does not require reciprocation or that the person being loved is deserving.

Love for others is central to living the Christian life. [Slide.] Jesus said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35). Let's show off the love of Christ through our love of others. Wouldn't you love to be a part of that kind of church?

I'm guessing that many of us feel overwhelmed hearing all this. You might be thinking, "I don't know if I have the time or energy ... or the love to be this way toward others." If you and I rely on our own nature and resources, we will be unwilling, self-centered, pleasers of ourselves, who only do good to others when they do good back to us, or they show how extremely worthy they are. That's sinful.

So, where will we get the motivation and power for this cross-like kind of love? Look with me for the answer in [Slide.] 1 John 3:17 "But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" Do you see what is to be the motivation and power for you to have cross-like love for others? Look for it. It is God's love inside a person that works in him to love another. We need God's love in us in order to love others well.

Friends, I'm convicted by the high call from Jesus and Paul and John to love others. My love won't be increasing without God's love abiding in me. You are the same. This is where faith and love are connected. Faith in God that looks to the heavenly, rather than earthly reward, is necessary to love with a cross-like love. Your and my love problem is a faith problem. So let's seek God for growing faith and then let the fruit of that show in loving others.

5. Conclusion

Let's look back to the big picture. 2 Thessalonians 1:3-4 encourages us to be a church whose faith in God is growing abundantly and whose love for each other is increasing. How does a

church change, improve, grow? By its members, one by one, changing, improving, growing. God's calling on us as a church translates to God's calling on us as church members.

So now, ask yourself, is my faith withering, stagnant ... or is it growing abundantly? And ask yourself, is my love for others withering, stagnant ... or is it increasing? God's call to us is clear. I'm guessing most of us have some repenting to do. That's good. Repenting is good. Christians are repenters. And as you repent, resolve to change. Right now, I'll stop for a moment. What do you need to do differently to obey God in the areas we've been talking about. [Pause.] And now ask God to give you all you need to do that. [Pause.]

At the end of this chapter in 2 Thessalonians, Paul says that he always prays for them. He tells them how he prays. Please stand and receive this prayer as a prayer of benediction from me. I love to pray these words for you.

God, please make these people of yours worthy of your calling. And please fulfill their every resolve for good and their every work of faith by your power. Do this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in them, and they may be glorified in you. Do it all according to the grace of you, our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.