

Passionate for Others' Spiritual Health

1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:10

Brenda and I were once at WalMart when our oldest was just a toddler. Brenda needed to go to another department to do some shopping so she left our daughter with me (not an altogether good idea). You can probably guess what happened. . . I turned my back and before I knew it she was gone! I immediately went into panic mode. I found a WalMart associate and told her that my child was missing. A few seconds later I heard over the loudspeakers, "Code Adam, Code Adam" – which signals to the employees that a child is missing. It's like an Amber Alert at WalMart. Brenda would tell you that when she heard that announcement she knew that I'd lost our daughter; somehow she just knew it. You can imagine the relief when somebody found her wandering around the store by herself and turned her in.

Most of you can think of times when the well-being of someone you love has been in doubt. Sometimes it's like you can't really live your life until you find out how your loved one is doing. When/if you find out that the person is really okay, it's like you start living again.

That is how Paul described his depth of concern for the Thessalonians. He had had to leave Thessalonica suddenly. In 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:10 Paul describes how passionate he was about the Thessalonians' spiritual health and how relieved he was to find out that they were thriving. Paul's passion for their spiritual health is extraordinary. Paul has already written that when he came to them the first time he had the tenderness of a mother (2:7) and the intensity of a father (2:11) who wanted so much for his children that he exhorted and encouraged and implored his children to live for God. They hadn't shared Christ in words only; they imparted their very lives – just like parents do with children.

This passage suggests that we should be *just as passionate* about the spiritual health of others in the body of Christ. What we see in Paul is really the heart of God toward others that all of us should have. This "passion for the spiritual health of others" will look different in different people depending on gifting, season of life, temperament, etc. But the heart is the same.

As we work our way through this passage, simply ask yourself the question, "Do I care about anybody else in the body of Christ the way Paul cared about the Thessalonians?" Next week we'll talk more specifically about the types of aspirations we should have for the people we care about (e.g., their love for others). But today I simply want us to challenge us to have this foundational passion for the spiritual health of others.

Paul's passion for the spiritual health of the Thessalonians (2:17-3:10)

Notice Paul's intense desire to be with the Thessalonians again. Remember that when Paul had to flee Thessalonica in the middle of the night, he left an infant church that faced threats and opposition. He legitimately didn't know whether the church would even survive.

17 But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short while-- in person, not in spirit-- were all the more eager with great desire to see your face. 18 For we wanted to come to you-- I, Paul, more than once-- and yet Satan hindered us.

Paul doesn't explain how "Satan hindered" him from coming to the Thessalonians. It could be that Paul saw Satan behind the legal roadblocks to returning. It could be that his "thorn in the

flesh” – probably some physical ailment which he attributed to Satan (2 Cor 12:7) – prohibited him from returning to Thessalonica. Either way, Paul wanted them to know that it wasn’t for lack of effort that he hadn’t been able to return.

19 For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? 20 For you are our glory and joy.

Paul is looking forward to the day when Jesus returns (a topic he’ll address at length in chapters 4 and 5). On that day he anticipates that the Thessalonians will be their “hope or joy or crown of exultation.” The “crown” was the laurel wreath placed on the head of the winner of an athletic competition. The Thessalonians were the crown on Paul’s head – not in a prideful way, but in the sense that they were the crowning fruit of his efforts. For Paul, their spiritual well-being was what his ministry was all about. They were his “glory and joy.” John wrote something similar in 3 John 1:4:

4 I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.

Given that Paul wasn’t able to visit the Thessalonian church in person, he did the next best thing: he sent someone in whom he had complete confidence, Timothy.

3:1 Therefore when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone, 2 and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith, 3 so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this.

“These afflictions” are a reference to the persecution that the Thessalonians endured at the hands of their countrymen (see 2:14). Paul was concerned that the Thessalonians’ afflictions would shake their faith and tempt them to go back to their old way of life. He mentions that they already knew that “we [Paul and the Thessalonians] have been destined for this.” As we’ve mentioned before, Paul had never tried to make the Christian life seem like a life of comfort. He had already made clear that in this world Christians were destined for a life that involved suffering for Christ.

Undoubtedly Paul’s conviction flowed from the fact that suffering for Christ was part of his specific calling as an “apostle to the Gentiles.” After Jesus confronted Paul on the road to Damascus, Jesus appeared to a man in Damascus named Ananias and told him to find Paul. When Ananias balked at the idea of befriending someone so violent toward the church, Jesus said (Acts 9:15-16),

15 "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; 16 for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake."

Paul had communicated to the Thessalonians that his assignment from Jesus involved suffering. He had communicated that they too were destined to suffer for Christ (see also Acts 14:22).

4 For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction; and so it came to pass, as you know.

Paul gave them a very realistic view of the Christian life. He let them know that coming to Christ can sometimes bring conflict and suffering. His own life was the best illustration of this reality. They had been warned to expect trouble. At the same time Paul understood that just because they had been forewarned didn't *guarantee* that the Thessalonians would suffer well.

5 For this reason, when I could endure it no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor would be in vain.

Paul couldn't stand not knowing whether or not they remained faithful to Christ. He was afraid that the tempter had lured them away from devotion to Jesus. He was afraid that all of their labor had been "in vain" – for nothing. That's why he sent Timothy to "strengthen and encourage" them in their faith (verse 2).

It's worth pointing out that Paul wasn't content to be able to say, "All that matters is that *I've* been faithful . . . whether or not there's lasting fruit isn't my concern. . ." No, he cared deeply about the Thessalonians and whether or not they remained faithful to Christ. Again, this is the concern of a parent. A parent isn't content to say, "All that matters is that I've been a good mom/dad. . . whether or not my children do well isn't my concern. . ." No, like a good mom or dad, Paul cared deeply about the Thessalonians; like a good mom/dad Paul had "imparted" his very life to them (2:8).

That's why he and Silas were so very encouraged when Timothy returned and gave a good report about them.

6 But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you,

When Timothy returned from Thessalonica, he reported first of all that they were strong in their faith toward Jesus Christ and their love for one another. Just as importantly for Paul, Timothy reported that the Thessalonians "always think kindly" of them. There was no resentment toward Paul at all. To the contrary, their love mirrored Paul's love for them. They "long[ed] to see [Paul] just as he long[ed] to see" them. The affection was clearly mutual. This news brought great comfort to Paul and Silas:

7 for this reason, brethren, in all our distress and affliction we were comforted about you through your faith; 8 for now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord.

Again, I think we can all relate to this sense of relief when we find out that someone we love is fine after all. This huge burden had been lifted: "for now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord." Notice how he continues:

9 For what thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account, 10 as we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith?

Paul's passion for the Thessalonians couldn't be contained. It spilled over into thanksgiving and joy; it stimulated prayer and the desire to see them face-to-face and continue investing in their lives. He says that they wanted to "complete what is lacking in [their] faith." Paul wasn't content that they were doing well; he wanted to continue to impart his life so that the deficiencies in the Thessalonians' faith would be addressed. He wanted them to experience God as fully as possible.

Here's my question again: "***Am I that passionate about the spiritual health of anybody else in the body of Christ?***" I know that some of you are. I've seen you pursue people so that you might encourage and strengthen them just like Timothy did. I've seen you cry out to God for their spiritual well-being the way Paul did. I've seen you invest incredible amounts of time and energy in others whose spiritual health was in jeopardy. I know that some of you excel in this. You are passionate about the spiritual health of others in the body of Christ. I've personally been the recipient of this type of care.

But others of you would have to say, "Honestly, that's not really something that I do. I care about my family but it really doesn't extend beyond them." There are a variety of reasons why this might be the case. I'll mention a few, pointing to a better way.

Maybe you have a ***spiritual inferiority complex***. You may not think that you have anything to offer and that you wouldn't make a difference in somebody else's life. If you are a follower of Christ, that simply is not true. Never underestimate the power of caring about someone else. I've found that many people have never really had anybody else care deeply and specifically about them. Even a little bit of genuine spiritual concern goes a long way. You cannot fake it, but if it's genuine a little goes a long way.

I'm not talking about anything complicated or fancy here. I'm talking about making a periodic phone call and saying, "I was thinking about you and wondered how you are doing." Like Paul, we should notice the trials that others are going through and express concern and pray. Or jotting a note to someone that says, "I wanted to encourage you with this Scripture." Imagine what a local church would be like if each of us took 5 minutes a week to express our spiritual aspirations for just one other person here at Faith. I suspect that it would change the atmosphere of our fellowship in a palpable way. It would infuse our fellowship with life and courage (that's what ***encouragement*** does) and hope.

"Don't try this at home" mindset. Perhaps this idea of being passionate about the spiritual health of others is the type of thing that you think is best left to the professionals – or at the very least pastors and elders. Perhaps you think, "What if I say or do something wrong?" This reluctance to engage others in the body of Christ is not the picture put forth in the New Testament. Paul didn't view himself as being in an elite class of Christians who were the only ones who were supposed to be passionate about the spiritual health of others.

To the contrary, the "one anothers" of Scriptures indicate that this should be the common experience of all believers. If we live out the one anothers of Scripture, we ***will be*** passionate about the spiritual health of others. "Accept one another as Christ has accepted us" (Romans 15:5). Do you know how powerful it can be to know that another person fully accepts them ("just as I am") just like Jesus does?!? "Bear one anothers' burdens and therefore fulfill the law

of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). Again, if you enter into another person’s pain and bear his/her burden, you will have an impact far out of proportion to the time/energy expended. This is something that every single one of us can and should do.

Fear of burn-out. Perhaps you feel like if you care so much about others in the body of Christ that you won’t have any spiritual energy left for your family or yourself. Sometimes we think that we have a finite amount of love and we need to make sure we don’t expend our love too extravagantly or we’ll run out.

It is true that we all have limitations and that we need to be careful not to extend ourselves beyond what is wise. But fundamentally love doesn’t work that way. We don’t have a finite amount of love/concern. Jesus indicated that we have such an inexhaustible amount of love that we can afford to love our enemies – legitimately care about their well-being. In fact, the person who loves in this way increases his/her capacity to love; that person is able to love more not less. I have found that when I expend spiritual energy in caring about others that I am predisposed to love more. When I merely go through the motions and only pretend like I care about someone else, it’s exhausting. But when I come away from a situation when I’ve invested deeply in someone’s life, I have a greater motivation and capacity to love.

If this is not your habit, let me encourage you to take some **simple first steps**. Chances are that there are already people in your life that you ***could*** care more deeply about:

- If you’re teaching a class (children, youth, adults), you don’t have to merely “teach a lesson”; you can let God enflame you with a passion for the spiritual health of the people in your class.
- Perhaps you’ve got a friend who is especially dear. You already care about that person. What about taking it to a deeper level and becoming passionate about his/her spiritual health?
- Sometimes God will lay someone on your heart. A couple of times lately people have told me that God laid someone on their hearts to befriend and encourage.

When you identify someone, the simple first step is to begin investing in that person: prayer, conversation, etc. Engage that person about his/her walk with God. You don’t have to have all the answers and you don’t always have to “feel” passionate about the other person’s spiritual health. You’re not being a hypocrite if you don’t feel it; you’re being obedient. And I think you’ll find (like Paul) that ***the more you invest, the more passionate you will be about the other person’s spiritual health.***

This may be a brand new thing for you; it may have never occurred to you to be passionate about the spiritual health of another person. You may be an adult, college student, high school, middle school, or elementary school. Whatever your age and stage of life, this type of concern could be the very thing that draws you closer to God than anything else. Some people are bored with the Christian life because there’s really nothing at stake; When you become passionate about the spiritual growth of others, there is an urgency to your own growth; you’re stimulated to pray and trust God like never before. Being passionate about the spiritual health of others isn’t merely powerful in the lives of others; it is a powerful dynamic in your own life as well.