

# What's Worth Celebrating?

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*First Things*

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**Bible Text:** 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13  
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This morning, I would encourage you to open your Bibles to the book of 1 Thessalonians 3 there toward the end of your New Testament. 1 Thessalonians 3. If you are a guest, if you're a visitor or by some chance you haven't had the opportunity to worship with us in some while, I want to invite you to a very specific and strategic journey through what we know as the book of 1 Thessalonians, and the reason that is strategic is thus: this is the very first communication, the very first letter that the Lord gave his church, his bride, through whom we collectively refer to as the Apostle Paul. Now you say, "Why is that so strategic? Why is that so important? Why are we going back to the first communication?" And the reason is this, because today when you use the term Christian or you talk about Christianity, there is a myriad of opinions and preferences and over time it has given birth to all kinds of confessions and creeds and debates and divisions, and if you allow me to say so today in our context, those words, it's just kind of muddy water. But 1 Thessalonians clarifies everything and one of the things that we've discovered is that most of the divisions, most of the contention, if you allow me to use the word, most of the confusion that is involved in today's expression of Christianity is not found in 1 Thessalonians and the reason is because all of this confusion, according to 1 Corinthians 14:33, is not of God. Man has interjected his opinion, his preference, or whatever it may be, and so really our reading and studying of 1 Thessalonians is a recapturing of what the church was always meant to be.

Today as we come to chapter 3 of 1 Thessalonians, we're going to begin in verse 6. Last week we asked a very important question: who should we listen to? Whose voice should bear weight in our lives? And basically we concluded that any voice that was contrary to the plumb line according to the prophet Amos or the word of God should be deviant or have a, shall we say, a marginal impact or influence at best. Today I'm gonna ask a very interesting question: who should we celebrate? Now when I ask that question you say, "What do you mean celebrate?" I don't know if you've realized this, but we as a people, humans, we like to celebrate. You say, "We do?" Yeah, watch what happens when your team wins or when your team loses. We tend to express emotions and passionate response to any entity or group that we find favor and, in fact, I would say one of the great struggles of today's contemporary expression of Christianity is that we have fallen into the trap of trying to celebritize folks. We want to put people on pedestals. We want to allow people to have platforms. And so when we talk about who should we celebrate,

let me kind of couch that a different way: who should we look to? Who should we model our lives after? Who should we kind of take a step back and go, "You know, that's what my life as a believer in Jesus Christ needs to look like."

In 1 Thessalonians 3 beginning in verse 6, the Apostle Paul is actually going to compliment these early Christians. He's going to discuss the things they're doing well. He's going to bring up a little bit of an area where they need to work on. But more importantly, he is celebrating some things and I think it bids us today to figure out what were they to be celebrated for, and we ought to celebrate the same things in our lives as well. Verse 6 of 1 Thessalonians 3 says,

6 But now when Timotheus came from you unto us, and brought us good tidings of your faith and charity, and that ye have good remembrance of us always, desiring greatly to see us, as we also to see you: 7 Therefore, brethren, we were comforted over you in all our affliction and distress by your faith: 8 For now we live, if ye stand fast in the Lord. 9 For what thanks can we render to God again for you, for all the joy wherewith we joy for your sakes before our God; 10 Night and day praying exceedingly that we might see your face, and might perfect that which is lacking in your faith? 11 Now God himself and our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way unto you. 12 And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you: 13 To the end he may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints.

Now on the surface, it appears that he is just repeating the report that he got back from Timothy, but there's so much more here. What we discover is that the lives they were living are the ones that we need to celebrate, not just of 2,000 years ago, but we need to see it emulated today as well. So there are five aspects or five qualities that we discover about these early believers that you're going to find very contrary to what we often, even in "modern Christianity," celebrate today.

The first quality is found in verse 6: they possess an authentic faith. Notice I didn't say sincere. You know you can be sincerely wrong, right? An authentic faith is a real faith. It is a genuine faith. It's not a here today, gone tomorrow. It is that which is longstanding, Notice in verse 6 in the middle it says they brought good tidings of your faith and charity. Now I know some of your Bibles will read the word "love" there and that's one of those words that throughout time we've twisted and we've turned to make so contrary to its original meaning, but that aspect of charity means to place somebody's interest above your own, to care for what others need more than your own personal desires or wants.

Why is this an authentic Christianity? Well, if you go over to 2 Peter 1, it talks about the foundation of our faith and it's interesting what the Lord says there about an authentic faith. It says that which is genuine and real, that you will build upon it virtue, that means rendering decisions and making decisions that are complementary to your faith and not

contrasting, and 2, your virtue, you will build it knowledge, a desire to know God, his word, his will greater in your life. Then you will have temperance and you will build upon your faith that ability to resist temptation and struggles in life. And then there will be patience, you don't give in, you don't give out, brotherly kindness, and here's the last word mentioned, are you ready? Charity. The reason it is so important we said your faith and your charity is he was recognizing that they had a genuine, true, authentic faith that was being expressed the way it was designed to be and not just according to the latest fad, poll or opinion that is out there.

Some years ago, actually many years ago, my wife and I had a very distinct privilege. We went to a parenting conference. Now I know some of you go, "You went to a parenting conference?" If you haven't been to one, you probably need to go to one. But nonetheless, we went to one and I'll never forget how it started. It was one of the most revolutionary moments in my life. This individual began, there's probably 50 to 75 couples that were there, he began by bantering with us a series of rhetorical questions regarding children's behavior and what we've observed versus what we can acknowledge of years gone by, and contrasting how things have "changed" through the years and through the ages. And then I'll never forget the illustration that he gave. He said, "Allow me to begin this entire weekend with a simple observation." He said, "If you were to go back before your smartphone, go back before you could order anything you wanted within two days online, go back before the days even of large bookstores and contraptions and information of knowledge," he said, "I want you to imagine that it's 100 years ago and that your child is not responding as you would so hope." He said, "What did you do?" He said, "Can I tell you what you did? You went down the street and you found the woman who'd raised four children of her own, she had eight grandchildren, and dozens of great grandchildren. You sat on the back porch with a cup of coffee and tears in your eyes and say, 'Tell me what to do. I don't have a clue.' And there she would dispense the wisdom of the ages of what has worked and what has not worked." And here is where he kind of took that proverbial 2 by 4 to us new parents, he said, "Here's the problem today: you have a bad night with your kid and you order the latest greatest book by a guy with the PhD who's never even had kids and you decide, 'Oh, that must be the trick.'" Can I tell you how many fly by night "digital Christians" there are out there? They've got large audiences, huge followings, they may have even written best selling books and have a podcast that's highly ranked, but the question is do they possess authenticity, longevity? You see, one of our problems is we often listen to the loudest voice which may not be the "right voice," and it says here that they possessed faith in charity and I think we need to start celebrating what we call those believers who've been through a few seasons, they don't just have a podcast. In other words, they've lived life, they've been through the highs, they've been through the lows. They've walked with the Lord through such a "time as this."

The second quality we see is found in verse 8. It says, "For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord." It's one thing to have authenticity to see this is the real deal and not just the most popular, loudest voice. The second quality is that they were steadfast. You may find this intriguing that in your New Testament all the passages that deal with spiritual warfare, this concept of behind the curtains of this material world there is this battle between the Lord and the enemies therein, all of those passages are actually directed to

people who are already believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. Ephesians 6, one of the most famous passages out there, it talks about that we wrestle not and fight not against flesh and blood but against the wiles of the enemy, principalities, powers, rulers, and then it talks about this famous armor of God: belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, helmet of salvation, shield of faith. sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, and our feet being shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace. But know right there in the middle of it, it says and the whole purpose is so that you will stand.

Now I mentioned the "loudest voice." Last week, I had an incident that just doesn't happen very often in my life, I found myself within earshot of a herd of sheep. Oh yeah, we were over in Israel and there was a herd of sheep that one guy was moving from one location to another and I did a little experiment. Now you know me, I'm a little crazy at times. There I am on the backside of a place I don't even know where I am, there's about 100 of these sheep coming by, and here's what I did, this is exactly what I go, "Come on, girls, come on." You know what they did? They followed me. Why? Because at that moment, I was the loudest voice. At that moment, I was the most prominent voice. But it was the shepherd that was coming in behind the flock, he was the one who had been there in the cold of night, he was the one who had been there when danger had been looming, and those who we need to celebrate, those who we need to pay attention to are those who have been "steadfast in the faith" and they're not just the newest, loudest voice of the faith.

Let me give you an illustration that took place this week. The picture I'm about to show you is actually a professional athlete. He plays hockey for a living, not something we do much in the upper corner of lower Alabama much. But nonetheless, we recognize this as a prominent sport. I want you to notice that the issue being dealt with is not addressed specifically. We live in a world of issues but I want you to hear his statement. "I'm choosing not to endorse something that is counter to my personal convictions which are based on the Bible, the highest authority in my life." Now I'll let you guess what the issue is but it's not in his quotation, is it, and here's why: it doesn't matter what the issue is. This is an individual in today's world who I would say is steadfast because let me ask you a rhetorical question: do you really think he's gonna get a salary increase for this one? You really think his contract is going to be renewed? In fact, I'd be willing to say his days in the "league" are probably going to be numbered because he said, "You know what? I don't, I don't care what is popular. I don't care what is celebrated. I don't care what is protected. If it doesn't line up with the word of God, I'm not gonna endorse it. I am going to be steadfast." These are the kind of people that we need to celebrate, not those who grab the headlines because somehow, someway they've got a large audience and a popular following. Some of you are probably Googling right now trying to find out who this guy is. His name's not even on the quote. Now that's steadfastness.

You know, it reminds me back in the book of Acts 2, the early church is just getting started and there's this verse in there that people have commented on just for years and years and years and I think they miss the whole point. It says that when the early church gathered, it says those who had many possessions, they sold them to help out those who did not. Now, unfortunately, there are people today who want to sell us this "Christian

socialism." That's not what it is because most of us have never lived in a culture where believing in Jesus Christ gets you ostracized from your family and gets you a pink slip from your job. But it might for this guy. In other words, in Acts 2, when it says they sold and they gave, is it possible that what we saw in the early church was, "Hey, if you're willing to take a stand for Jesus, if you're willing to put it on the line and you can no longer go back home, you can no longer be occupied at your profession, we will come alongside of you because we celebrate people who don't cave to the culture." Think about that. The early church said, "Man, if you're willing to stand for it, we're willing to support it."

So really what these early believers did is they were authentic and they were true, they were seasoned, they were steadfast, but here's an interesting aspect when we get to verse 10: they were teachable. You say, "Teachable?" Listen to verse 10. There's actually kind of a corrective statement here. He says, "Night and day praying exceedingly that we might see your face," listen to this statement that the Apostle Paul makes, "and might perfect that which is lacking in your faith." In other words, he recognized there were still some deficiencies, there were still some areas, and rather than pushing back and going, "Oh, no, no, you don't understand. This is just how we do it in Thessalonica." Can I tell you how many times I've heard a response to scripture with, "You don't understand. This is just how we do it. This is just how we're wired. This is just our way of doing things." He said, "You understand that there are things in your life that need perfecting." We need to celebrate people who don't think they're right all the time. We need to celebrate folks who said, "You know what? God hasn't taken me home yet. He's still molding me. He's still shaping me. There is still perfection to go."

You know, the greatest example is the Apostle Paul himself. 1 Thessalonians is the first chronological communication, 2 Timothy is the last. In fact, you read 2 Timothy, you get to the end of his life, you discover that whom we know as the Apostle Paul is not only on his way to "certain death" but he's imprisoned for his faith. In fact, a lot of the last letters that we get from the Apostle Paul are written in prison. 2 Timothy 4, it's not just the last letter, it's the last chapter. This is the end of his life. He knows at any moment and at any day they could call him forth and his life physically will be removed from him. It's interesting what he asked for in his dying days. What does he ask for? Three things in verse 13, he says, "Winter is coming," it came to us this week, and he said, "Winter is coming. Please bring me a coat." It makes perfect sense. Then there's two other things he asked for. He said, "Bring the books and bring the parchments." Now the books would be literature as we know literature and the parchments were scripture. You say, "Well, why is that so significant?" Because he knows he's got but a few days and the Apostle Paul was the Apostle Paul because he recognized, "I've still got something to learn. I still need to be shaped. I still need to be molded." He never fell into the trap of saying, "Oh, I'm good wherever I am. This is satisfactory for me."

And so when we talk about who we should celebrate, who we should listen to, who we should emulate our lives over, we need to make sure they're authentic, they're the real deal, not just the loudest, newest voice. We need to make sure that they are steadfast, that they're not just wooed by the the latest cultural phenomena. And we need to celebrate

people like the Apostle Paul who are teachable, saying, "I still desire to learn. I still desire because I'm not where I need to be yet I desire to be where he needs me to be." If the Apostle Paul said that he needed to be taught by scripture, then who are we to say that we're at a place that we can sit back and say we're good to go? One of the reasons that we listen to him so much, other than the Lord inspiring, is because he was teachable.

The fourth thing we see is in verse 12. It says, "And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you." They're authentic, they're steadfast, they're teachable. You expect this word to come up but here it is: they're selfless. You see, we've taken that word, I mentioned it earlier in our context today, and we've made love this thing of whatever gives us satisfaction, whatever gives us pleasure, whatever gives us what we so desire, but biblically speaking to love is to put somebody else's interest above your own. That famous chapter in 1 Corinthians 13, what we call the love chapter of the charity chapter, love keeps no record of wrong. It doesn't do this, it doesn't do that. When you look at basically the theme of that chapter, he's saying that somebody who truly loves you will put you above themselves, not just occasionally but "at all times." I love the end of that famous "love chapter." We never quote it enough. It says the greatest of these is love. We know that. But do you know what it says right after that? It says, "When I was a child I acted like a child, but now that I'm grown, I act like an adult. I no longer act as a child." You say, "Why is that significant?" Because we have become a culture, even within the umbrella of Christianity, that perpetuates adolescence. We want youth to continue infinite, just forever. And one of the things we need to recognize is that that famous individual known as Esther who went into the king and saved the Jewish people from Haman and his horrible plan, who did she listen to? Haman was the loudest voice. Haman was the popular voice. But there's a guy by the name of Mordecai. He was an old man with gray hair. I've got a funny feeling that he was authentic, steadfast, teachable. She went to him and said, "Okay, what do I do?" And he basically told her that by her going to the king she needed to put everybody else above herself. Selfless. It says that your loved one toward another. We need to quit celebrating those who "have everything." Maybe we need to start celebrating those who are willing to give of themselves and to put others above themselves.

You know, I know you're familiar a couple weeks ago I had the opportunity to take a group of our people to what we know as the Holy Land or to Israel, and yes, there's all these archaeological sites, the biblical verification, that's great, but there's one excursion that we made. We went to the most northern tip of Israel that you can safely go to. Historically speaking, it is the site of what initiated in 1973 as the Yom Kippur War, and today it's just a place of of memorial. But there when you're standing there, you are about five miles across the field from what looks like a subdivision. It looks like suburbia is what it looks like. It's hard to tell on a cold, foggy day, but if you look clearly across the field in front of all these houses you'll see what you expect to see between two countries who can't get along, it's called a fence. There is a fence that looks much like what you would see at a place of incarceration or a prison camp. It's got all types of razor wire and such because these two respective entities are not necessarily "friends" with each other, and not just in 1973, but all throughout time those that resided on the northern side have

faced an unusual scenario. Their own governments, their own military, will kick them out of their own houses so they can take up a position against their "enemies" to the south. Five miles away is where we stood. You say, "What does this have to do with selflessness?" Most of us don't live five miles away from those who desire to exterminate us, most people today that are hearing my voice don't live within earshot of a place that would love for your life to end sooner than later. You know what they call that fence? The good fence. You say, "Why do they call it the good fence?" Because when conflict arises and if you ever watch the news it arises all the time, those who reside in the south go in the middle of the night and give food to those who have been displaced by their own governmental officials. They call it the good fence. It's a pretty clear picture of what you and I as believers have been called to do. Steadfastness does not mean rudeness. The willingness to offer food, the willingness to offer beverage, the willingness to say, "This isn't your fault that it's happening," it's a selfless disposition. It's a selfless behavior.

Last but not least, we need to celebrate folks that are ambitious. Notice what it says in verse 13, it says their hearts were unblameable and there was holiness. You know, today we live in a society where it's all about us, what will make us happy, what will give us pleasure, what will give us what we often call success. I tease when I say this but I mean it legitimately, can you imagine how few people would come to a "Bible conference" where the topic was how to become more holy. We're not really interested in holiness because usually holiness isn't what we desire. It's not what we want. It goes contrary to our flesh. It goes contrary to our selfish inclination and our will. But he celebrated them because they were blameless. He celebrated them because they lived a life of holiness.

Now don't get me wrong, I think all of us at some point and some level, we love what we call a good testimony. I've heard hundreds and thousands of them, and you have as well, where individuals who come out of a life of addiction, they come out of a life of all types of anger and retribution, those who lived completely for the enemy and for the world, there's a time in their life where they hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, they repent of their sins, they ask Jesus to save them and they're saved. And we love those testimonies, don't get me wrong. You do realize that was the Apostle Paul's testimony. He was one who tried and attempted to take other people's lives against their will because he thought he was propagating truth. Multiple times in the book of Acts he stands before Felix and Festus and Agrippa and all these folks, and he gives his testimony about who he was before he met Jesus. Don't get me wrong, those are incredible testimonies but can I peel away some layers here? He didn't say your testimony is it was really ugly and now it's really pretty. What's his testimony? Unblameable and holy.

Can I share with you the folks I think we need to start celebrating? Let me give you a hypothetical. Let's take a young person, a young person who grows up not just in a home but a home where his parents are faithful to the things of God, where the Bible is available, church is encouraged. And it's not just the parents, there's multiple generations. There's actually grandparents who fostered and initiated this and so you have a young person who's in what we might call at minimum of the third generation. They've really not been exposed to a whole lot other than what you and I would call biblical Christianity. Because of that, unlike many of the testimonies that are "so popular," as a

young child in the kid's ministry they hear the gospel, they respond appropriately, and by the time they become 18-20 years old, their testimony goes a little something like this. "I grew up in a home that celebrated Jesus. I grew up in a home that went to church regularly. I was only in 3rd grade and I realized I was a sinner headed to hell. I asked Jesus to save me and, well, he didn't really pull me out of the ditch, he kept me from falling in." Man, how many people want to pay to hear that testimony? It's not real exciting is it? You know whose testimony that was? Timothy's. Who did he send to them? Timothy. He said, "Guys, I'm gonna send a guy." You go back to 1 and 2 Timothy, Timothy's mother and his grandmother taught him the scriptures. He didn't go in saying, "Man, I used to be a drug using pimp and now I found Jesus." You know what he said? "Um, my whole life I've known the scriptures and this Jesus guy that you've heard of, he really did raise from the dead, and if you don't believe in him, you really will go to hell. It doesn't matter how religious you are. It doesn't matter how 'good' you are. He didn't pull me out of the ditch, but he sure did keep me from falling in it."

Notice what it says, unblameable in holiness. You know, there's a statement we hear oftentimes with these testimonies. Somebody goes, "You know, I was just radically saved." Can I give you some theological position today? Anytime somebody asks Jesus to save them, they are radically saved because the Bible says in Ephesians 2, "You were dead in your sins and in your trespasses." And maybe it's worthy of celebrating, maybe it is worthy of recognition, I love the dramatic testimonies, they are all inspiring but, you know, maybe we ought to celebrate those who've lived generations and decades of holiness and unblameable-ness. Yes, we need all the testimonies. Paul's testimony was the "radical one," and Timothy's not so much. What was Paul saying? Let celebrate because it doesn't matter what your background is, it doesn't matter where you were or what you did, if you've come to a point in your life where you've asked Jesus to save you, you've been radically saved and you have the opportunity not just to live a couple of decades, but to live your entire life in an unblameable holy dedication to the Lord. What we read today won't make the latest greatest podcast, bestseller or social media phenomena but it just made the early church that which turned the whole world upside down.

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. Maybe today you're that individual whose back story is what we might call tainted, or maybe not so much. It doesn't matter what your back story is, as I said in Ephesians 2, the Bible says we are all dead in our sins and our trespasses and we all need to come to that point where we recognize that we have a sin condition that only Jesus can save us from. The Bible says whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. It doesn't say whoever becomes a Baptist, whoever starts this, stops that, passes this test or checks off that box. It says if you recognize as the verses prior to that say that you have sin in your life and you believe and you confess it, that Jesus will save you. Maybe today is that day where for the very first time you call on the name of the Lord. If this is who you are, whether in person or online, let me encourage you just to cry out. It doesn't have to be an audible cry. It doesn't even have to be the same words that I or somebody else would use. This is your heart's cry to your Savior to save you from your sins. Maybe your heart's cry will go a little something like this. "God, today I recognize it doesn't matter what others think or what I think, according



to your word, I have sinned. I have fallen short of your glory. God, your word also says the result or the wages of my sin is death and, God, I believe it and I deserve it. But your word also says but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ. So God, today I believe, I believe I've got a sin problem that only Jesus can fix. God, I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was willing to come on my behalf. God, I have belief that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was willing to live a sinless life, rejecting all opportunity, all temptation of man so that he might save me. God, today I believe that as we heard in song today that when Jesus Christ allowed himself to go to the cross that was my cross and those were my nails that he allowed himself to be affixed to so that he would pay the price for my sin. And God, today I believe that three days later when he rose from the grave, God, he made it possible for my sins to be forgiven and my soul to be saved. God today, Lord, I don't have all the answers to the struggles and the issues and the problems of this life but there's one thing I know, I've got a sin problem that only Jesus can solve. So the best way I know how, I'm asking you to forgive me. I'm asking you to save me. I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed and our eyes still closed. maybe you're that person today for the very first time you cried out to the Lord to save you. In a moment, I'm gonna pray over us and we're gonna stand and sing. I just want to invite you just to step out and step forward. We have a team set aside. We have a room set aside. We just want to hear your story like we said, that we just want to hear your testimony. We want to pray with you. We want to pray for you. And we want to celebrate what God has done in your life. Maybe today that's your story, we would love to be a part of it. Maybe today you say, "I've got that covered but I need to fall in baptism. I need to become a part of this incredible church." Whatever it is, if you step forward, we are here to pray with you and walk you through whatever it is. But maybe today you say, "You know what, Pastor, I got all that covered." In a few moments you're gonna walk out of this room and there's a very important question you need to ask yourself in light of today's message: who do you listen to? Who do you get direction from? Who do you emulate? Who do you want to be like and do they look like what we read today in the word of God?

*Heavenly Father, as we come to this time of decision, God, thank you. God, thank you that you don't leave us alone in this journey with you but you do bring us alongside in a fellowship of believers, those who we can look to and who we can trust and who we can emulate and imitate our lives after. And God, I pray today that as you've taken your Spirit and you've taken your word and you've done a work in our lives, that whatever and wherever we are, we would just simply respond to you how you've spoken to us through your word. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*