“I COULDN’T CARE MORE”

1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:5

By

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Elie Wiesel observed (goodreads.com), “The opposite of love is not hate, it’s indifference.” When we don’t care about someone, we do not love that person. We hear it in the phrase, “I couldn’t care less!” The more recent expression is, “Whatever!” Someone shares a problem; you shrug and say, “Whatever!” You don’t care about that person or what he’s going through. Years ago, I read about a woman in New York City who got up and closed her window because the screams of someone being attacked in the street below was annoying her. Someone is being beaten or raped or murdered outside? “Whatever!” She only cared about herself.

As Christians, we should be characterized by the phrase, “I couldn’t care more,” not by, “I couldn’t care less.” We should truly care for one another and for all people. In our text, we see the apostle Paul’s heart for these new converts in Thessalonica: He couldn’t care more! He expresses his care for his new children in the faith in very emotional language. He wants them to know how deeply he feels about them and how painful his forced separation from them has been. This theme runs through the end of chapter 3, but in this message we can only cover through verse 5. Paul’s example teaches us that if we want to impact people for eternity, we must care for them deeply. How?

**If we truly care for one another, we will want to be together to strengthen and encourage one another spiritually.**

In 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20, we see Paul’s deep desire to be with these people who had become very dear to him. But due to reasons beyond his control, he couldn’t come to them. So he did the next best thing: he sent Timothy to strengthen and encourage them in their faith, even though it meant that Paul had to be left alone in Athens. After Timothy returned to Paul with good news about the Thessalonians’ faith and love, Paul rejoiced and wrote this letter to deal with some of the issues that Timothy had reported to him.
One concern that Timothy reported was that Paul’s enemies in Thessalonica, who had forced him to leave town, were attacking his motives with these new converts. They were saying things like, “We understand how you got carried away by these smooth-talking foreigners. They really seemed concerned about you and led you to believe that they had your best interests at heart. But their sudden departure and failure to return shows that they really didn’t care about you. They’re probably relaxing in some luxury hotel and chuckling about how easy it was to dupe you into following them. Now you’re suffering and being publicly ridiculed because you believe these silly myths that these foreigners foisted on you. Why don’t you just forget about this Jesus thing and go back to leading a normal life?”

So Paul shares his heart to let these people know how much he cared about them and how he would come back and be with them at a moment’s notice, if he could. First, we learn...

1. **If we truly care for one another, we will want to be together.**

   Note three things:

   A. The desire to be together stems from our genuine caring for one another.

   1 Thess. 2:17: “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.”

   Because of intense opposition that had dragged Jason, one of the new believers, before the civil authorities, Paul, Silas, and Timothy had been forced to leave town quickly under the cover of darkness (Acts 17:10). The Greek word translated, “taken away from you,” was used to refer to children who had lost their parents or of parents who were separated from their children (G. K. Beale, 1-2 Thessalonians [IVP Academic], p. 90). It was an emotionally painful ordeal! Paul assures the Thessalonians that although they were out of sight, they were not out of mind, or heart.

   He piles up words to express his deep feelings: We “were all the more eager with great desire to see your face.” The word translated “desire” is used most frequently in the New Testament to refer to lust. Here it’s used in a pure sense to refer to strong emo-
tional desire. We can also hear his feelings for these spiritual children when he tells them (1 Thess. 3:10), “we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face.” He uses different words, but equally emotional, to tell the Philippians that he has them in his heart, adding (Phil. 1:8), “For God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.” On a personal level, he later tells Timothy, his son in the faith (2 Tim. 1:3-4), “I constantly remember you in my prayers night and day, longing to see you, even as I recall your tears, so that I may be filled with joy.”

Luke gives us a moving picture not only of how much Paul cared for those he ministered to, but also how much they cared for Paul. After he told the Ephesian elders that they probably would no longer see his face (Acts 20:25), we read (Acts 20:36-38),

When he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And they began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him, grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they were accompanying him to the ship.

In our text, Paul calls the Thessalonians “brethren,” or, “brothers and sisters.” When the Holy Spirit causes people to be born again, they become our brothers and sisters in the faith. We’re family! And families should want to get together often. I know, there are usually difficult members in the family whom you’d rather not have to interact with! Families aren’t perfect. But God has designed the family as the basic unit of society. Your family should be the place where you’re accepted just because of who you are, not because of anything deserving that you’ve done. And the church is the family of God.

I’ve never understood why some people attend church and leave quickly after the service is over without hanging out with the family of God. They don’t know their brothers and sisters and they never get together with them during the week. Nor have I understood why out of over 300 people who come on Sunday mornings, when we have an evening meeting for prayer or a mission report or teaching, we rarely have 30 people show up. If we truly care about one another, we should want to get together often. Why doesn’t it happen?
B. Our enemy works to hinder our getting together.

1 Thess. 2:18: “For we wanted to come to you— I, Paul, more than once—and yet Satan hindered us.” Although we may not think about it much or recognize his sinister schemes, we wrestle against the unseen spiritual forces of wickedness in heavenly places (Eph. 6:12). Like a wolf preying on a flock of sheep, Satan knows that it’s easier to pick off the sheep that is not staying with the flock. If he can keep us from being together, we’re more vulnerable to his temptations and those that come at us from the world and the flesh. The word that Paul uses for “hindered” was used of an army cutting through a road so that the other army could not easily get through.

But how did Paul know that Satan was behind this roadblock? In Acts 16:6-10, we read of Paul, Silas, and Timothy:

They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them; and passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

We’re not told how the Holy Spirit did not permit the missionaries from preaching in Asia or Bithynia. It could have been a direct voice from God. Or, perhaps it was an inner feeling of unrest about going that way (2 Cor. 2:12-13). Or perhaps circumstances blocked the way. We don’t know. Nor do we know how Paul knew that it was Satan hindering him from returning to Thessalonica, not the Holy Spirit.

Paul knew from the Old Testament that while Satan can harm God’s people, he can only go as far as God, in His wise purpose, permits. God gave Satan permission to inflict great suffering on Job, but not to take his life (Job 1:6-12; 2:6). There is also an interesting glimpse into the spirit world when Daniel was fasting and praying for three weeks for enlightenment (Dan. 10:2-14). Finally,
an angel appeared to Daniel and said, in effect, “I would have been here sooner, but the prince of Persia withstood me for three weeks until Michael the archangel came to help me.”

Here, the hindrance could have been the bond that Jason was forced to post guaranteeing that Paul wouldn’t return (Acts 17:9). Or, it may have been Paul’s recurring health problem, which he elsewhere refers to as “a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan” (2 Cor. 12:7). We just don’t know. But, we do know that in spite of Paul’s fervent desire to return to see these dear people again and in spite of his repeated earnest prayers (1 Thess. 3:10), Satan blocked the way.

Some Bible teachers tell Christians that they have authority over the devil and they can command him around as if he were their “trained poodle” (the phrase is from Gary Shogren, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 1 & 2 Thessalonians [Zondervan], p. 134). While James 4:7 assures us, “Resist the devil and he will flee from you,” the actual process isn’t always easy! Sometimes the Lord has a purpose that we don’t understand where He uses the devil to oppose us or hinder our way. He may use the devil to keep us humble, as He did with Paul’s “thorn in the flesh.” He may want us to wait on Him in prayer for a period of time, as happened with Daniel. But we should remember that our unseen enemy doesn’t want us to be together with other believers, where we would be spiritually encouraged and strengthened. Separation may be necessary at times, but it shouldn’t be a regular thing.

C. The final result of our being together will be overflowing joy in the presence of the Lord Jesus at His coming.

1 Thess. 2:19-20: “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? For you are our glory and joy.” We learn here that Jesus is Lord and He is coming again bodily to be with us. When He comes, He will reward each one according to his deeds (Rom. 2:6; 2 Cor. 5:10). Because of that, Paul lived daily with a view to the final judgment, when he hoped that he would not have run in vain (Phil. 2:16; 1 Cor. 9:24-27; 15:2, 58; Gal. 2:2; 4:11; 1 Thess. 3:5).

Paul again piles up words to emphasize how much the Thessalonians meant to him. He calls them “our hope or joy or crown
of exultation.” He adds (1 Thess. 2:20), “For you are our glory and joy.” In like manner, he tells the Philippians (4:1) that they are his “joy and crown.” “Crown” refers to the wreath or garland that was awarded to the victors in sporting competition (1 Cor. 9:25, where “wreath” is the same Greek word). “Exultation” is the word for “boasting.” “Glory” sometimes refers to the same thing. Sometimes these words may refer to sinful pride (Rom. 3:27; 1 Cor. 5:6; Gal. 6:13); but at other times they refer legitimately to what God has accomplished through us (Rom. 15:17; 1 Cor. 15:31; 2 Cor. 7:4; 11:10, 17; Gal. 6:14; Phil. 3:3). Neither Paul nor the Thessalonians could boast in their own spiritual achievements. Everything was due to God’s grace alone, seen supremely in the cross (Gal. 6:14).

So the point here is that if we care for one another, we should deeply desire to be with one another often. And the point of being together is not just to talk about sports and the weather (although there’s nothing wrong with small talk, per se), but rather to strengthen and encourage one another spiritually so that in the day of Christ, we may have reason to glory because we did not labor in vain (1 Thess. 3:5).

2. **If we truly care for one another, we will strengthen and encourage one another spiritually when we’re together.**

Again, note three things:

A. To see others strengthened and encouraged in their faith is often costly.

1 Thess. 3:1-2: “Therefore when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone, 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, …” The account in Acts doesn’t include all the details, but we do learn that Paul first went to Athens alone, while Silas and Timothy remained in Berea (Acts 17:14). They joined him in Athens as soon as they were able, but Paul’s intense anguish in wondering how the Thessalonians were doing led him to send Timothy, who could slip into town without the notice that Paul would have drawn. Also, Silas went somewhere else in Macedonia, perhaps to Philippi (Acts 18:5). But that meant that Paul was left alone in Athens and then in
Corinth, for several months, until these faithful workers were able to rejoin him in Corinth.

We see how much of a sacrifice this was for Paul by the way that he describes Timothy: “our brother and God’s fellow worker in the gospel of Christ.” Timothy was like a faithful son to Paul in his labors in the Lord (Phil. 2:19-22). To refer to him as “God’s fellow worker” (some manuscripts read “servant”) is a startling truth (see 1 Cor. 3:9). God uses “earthen vessels” like us to accomplish His eternal purpose in the lives of others (2 Cor. 4:7)! It was painful for Paul to send Timothy on this mission, but he did it because he was more concerned for the spiritual well-being of the Thessalonians than he was for his own comfort. In the same way, showing genuine care for one another means putting others’ needs ahead of our own. But love is willing to sacrifice to help others spiritually.

B. The main area where we need to be strengthened and encouraged is our faith.

Paul refers to faith (or, “believe”) in 1:3, 8; 2:13 (“believe”); 3:2, 5, 6, 7, & 10; 2 Thess. 1:3, 10 (“believed”), 11; 2:12 (“not believe”), 13; 3:2; so it is a major theme in these letters. It may be roughly equivalent to “being a Christian” (Gene L. Green, The Letters to the Thessalonians [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 164). Or it may refer to believing the gospel (1 Thess. 1:8), or to trusting God to work through us (1 Thess. 1:3; 2 Thess. 1:11). In our text (1 Thess. 3:2, 5), it especially focuses on trusting God in the midst of trials.

Faith is never some nebulous or undefined optimism, but rather trusting in the truth of God about Jesus Christ as revealed in His word (2 Thess. 2:13; John 1:14, 17; 14:6). In Romans 10:17, Paul says, “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.” In Romans 14:23 he adds, “whatever is not from faith is sin.” Hebrews 11:6 tells us, “And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.” So ongoing faith in God and the promises of His word, especially centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ, is essential. But...

C. Trials are a main hindrance to being strengthened and encouraged in our faith.
Paul sent Timothy to strengthen and encourage them in their faith (1 Thess. 3:3-5), “so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this. 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. 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 didn’t teach these new believers that miraculous healing and financial success were their right as “King’s kids”! He taught them, rather, that as Christians, we are destined or appointed for trials. The godly Simeon used this word when he told Mary concerning the baby Jesus (Luke 2:34), “Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed.” Paul used it of himself when he said (Phil. 1:16) that he had been “appointed for the defense of the gospel.”

Jesus plainly told His disciples (John 15:20), “If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.” He added (John 16:33), “These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.” Paul taught (Rom. 8:17) that we must suffer with Christ “so that we may also be glorified with Him.” What Paul sent Timothy to do in Thessalonica, he also had done with new converts in Asia (Acts 14:21-22): “After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, ‘Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.’” He plainly told Timothy (2 Tim. 3:12), “Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” How so many professing Christians could be led astray by the false “health and wealth gospel” can only be attributed to satanic deception!

We need to teach new believers early on to expect trials and how to handle them by trusting in the Lord. Trials will come as a test of the genuineness our faith. In the parable of the sower, Jesus said that the seed sown on the rocky soil (thin soil with a hard layer just underneath) received the word immediately with joy, but they had no roots. So when affliction or persecution arises because of
the word, they immediately fall away (Mark 4:3-20). That’s what Paul refers to when he feared that his labor might have been in vain. Many may make a profession of faith in Christ, but only those who persevere and bear fruit for eternity are truly saved.

Paul’s anxiety or fear for the Thessalonians here was not the sinful anxiety that comes from a lack of prayer (Phil. 4:7). He was constantly praying for these new converts (1 Thess. 1:2-3; 3:10). Rather, this was his godly concern for all the churches (2 Cor. 11:28). It was the concern of a spiritual parent for his children in the faith. It was the godly care that we all should feel for one another. If you see a believer going through trials, care enough to come alongside to strengthen and encourage him in his faith.

**Conclusion**

Frank Reed spent from 1986 to 1990 as a hostage in Lebanon. For months at a time he was blindfolded or chained to a wall and kept in absolute silence. Although he was beaten, made ill, and tortured, Reed felt most the lack of anyone caring. In an interview with Time, he said, “Nothing I did mattered to anyone. I began to realize how withering it is to exist with not a single expression of caring around [me]… I learned one overriding fact: caring is a powerful force. If no one cares, you are truly alone.” (Leadership [Winter, 1991], p. 49.)

As Christians, we’re encouraged (1 Pet. 5:7) to be, “casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.” But the Lord has put us into His family where we should care for one another. If we truly care for one another, we will want to be together to strengthen and encourage one another spiritually.

**Application Questions**

1. Why do so many Christians think that attending a church service without getting to know other believers is sufficient?
2. How can we know whether a hindrance is from the Lord or from the enemy? What principles apply?
3. How have you been strengthened and encouraged spiritually by other believers when you were in a trial? Pass it on!
4. When does genuine concern spill over into sinful anxiety?

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