

WHEN OTHERS CARED FOR YOU 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13

Objective: To help believers find and use ways to demonstrate their concern for others.

There are many situations that come to our attention where other people have problems and challenges and we feel empathy for them in their situation. Most of the time, we never get past the point of “feeling.” That really does them a lot of good! I’m sure they are encouraged and helped by our feeling sorry for them! How could they be if we do nothing to demonstrate our concern for them?

Empathic feelings are essential if we are going to demonstrate genuine concern, however, these feelings are just the starting point. Why is it that we don’t get beyond the feeling stage? It is a matter of priorities. Most of us are so focused on ourselves and our needs or desires that we just can’t be bothered.

The apostle Paul had a lot of opposition and challenges to the work he was doing. A lot of that work involved interacting with and helping local churches (many of which he was instrumental in starting) that were struggling and needed encouragement. In his first letter to the church at Thessalonica we can find examples of what can be done to show genuine care for others.

Confirm the Relationship

¹⁷But 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. ¹⁸For we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, more than once—and *yet* Satan hindered us. ¹⁹For 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? ²⁰For you are our glory and joy. 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20 (NASB95)

The ability to show concern and do things that provide care to others is contingent on having established a relationship with the persons involved. Paul and Silas had been with the Christians at Thessalonika for a relatively short period of time before the Jews stirred up so much trouble that (for safety reasons) were sent away to Berea. The account in Acts 17 indicated that they had reasoned in the synagogues for three Sabbaths before the Jews stirred up the city. This was the occasion when they had been accused of “turning the world upside down.” The bottom line was that the group of Christians in Thessalonika were very new in the faith. Yet they had flourished and in this part of Paul’s letter he wanted to encourage them in the face of the hardships they were encountering.

Paul definitely had a connection with these people even though he was hundreds of miles away. We would say “he was absent in body, but not in spirit;” or “they were out of sight, but not out of mind.” We use this saying even today to try to communicate the empathic connection we have with family and friends. However, it is just not the same as being there. It wasn’t for lack of wanting to be there that kept Paul away. Paul put the blame on Satan for his not being able to get back to Thessalonika. There was opposition and false teaching that hindered Paul as he went about establishing churches in various areas. From Thessalonika he went to Berea and the Jews followed him there to stir up trouble. From there he moved on to Athens and encountered additional false teachings from the philosophers (in addition to the opposition he already had from the Jews).

Paul saw the church at Thessalonika as a prime example of the way new Christians were to conduct themselves as a local church. They gave Paul hope that the work he and Silas were doing was accomplishing something good. Paul could point to them as a model. One sure way to

show care and concern for a person is to find the good and positive attributes they have and let them know that you noticed.

What about our church - would people use us as an example of how to do church in the 21st Century?

Be There

¹Therefore when we could endure *it* no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone, ²and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith, 1 Thessalonians 3:1-2 (NASB95)

Paul was with them in spirit but that was not satisfying to either Paul or the Christian at Thessalonika. Since **he** could not come to them, he did the next best thing of sending them a representative who could help them in the same way Paul would if he could be there. In many cases, "being there" with someone you care about is a sacrifice. But, because you care, it is a sacrifice that you want to make. While Paul could not personally make the sacrifice of going, it was a hardship on him and Silas to give up the help they were getting from Timothy while they were in Athens.

How many times have we found ourselves in a situation of wanting to help someone and the cost of doing so seemed to be very high. The tendency is to put off helping in the hope that things will get better. So often, we get the point where we feel that we can't wait any longer. This is where Paul and his team in Athens found themselves.

Can you think of a time or situation where you wound up making a sacrifice to demonstrate concern for someone you care about? What about the inverse of that - someone made a sacrifice to show concern for you?

Face Reality

³so that no one would be disturbed by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this.

⁴For 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. 1 Thessalonians 3:3-4 (NASB95)

You've heard of people being in denial. When problems come and we refuse to face the reality of the problems and work to deal with what is happening, then we have difficulty moving on in life with what needs to be done. Wishing that we were in some other reality does nothing to overcome the circumstances in which we find ourselves. One way to show concern and care for others is to help them understand their situation for what it is and to come up with way to rise above the difficulties we face in life's journey. For example, if we deny that the bridge is washed out on the road ahead of us, then we may wind up in the river and drown. If we accept that the bridge is washed out, then we can put our efforts into building a raft to cross the river.

Paul reminded them of the fact that afflictions would be a part of the Christian walk. He had warned them in advance and they had already experienced it. If you know that problems are coming and they a part of life, then we deal with them and move on.

Do we have a tendency to deny problems that come our way? How many times have we asked, "Why me, Lord?"

Prayer

⁵For 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. ⁶But 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, ⁷for this reason, brethren, in all our distress and affliction we were comforted about you

through your faith; ⁸for now we *really* live, if you stand firm in the Lord. ⁹For 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, ¹⁰as we night and day keep praying most earnestly that we may see your face, and may complete what is lacking in your faith? ¹ Thessalonians 3:5-10 (NASB95)

Paul's objective for the missionary journey he made was to establish churches. He had been able to share with them the truth of the gospel and by sending representatives and through letters would be able to help them become grounded in the Word of God. It takes both the Word of God and prayer to establish a church. Warren Wiersbe has observed that "all teaching and preaching and no prayer produces a church with light but no power. If there is all prayer but no teaching of the Word, you may have a group of enthusiasts who have more heat than light!"

The proper procedure is for the leader to talk to God about his people, and then talk to his people about God. This is a good formula for us to us when we are concerned about others. We can start with prayer and see how God would lead us in demonstrating our concern.

Paul's concern was not so much their safety or happiness, but their faith. The word "faith" is used five times in this chapter. Satan is the enemy of our faith, for if he can get us to doubt God and His Word, he will rob us of the enjoyment of every blessing we have in Christ. Paul wanted them to have mature (perfected) faith (v. 10). Faith is more than a concept that just sits within the heart and never changes; it is alive and able to grow. The desire of everyone of us for those we love should be to see them abounding in love, established in hope, and growing in faith.

One of the things that Paul was good at doing was to communicate expectations for the church by giving positive feedback on what they were doing well. Notice how he did this in verse 8. We could paraphrase this verse to say, "We are encouraged when we know that you are living faithfully." In this way, the people for whom we are demonstrating our concern can realize they can and do minister to us, also.

Coupled with his compliment of what they had accomplished in their growth in the faith was the realization that they still had room to grow. When we are demonstrating concern for people we not only affirm them for the good things that are evident but we also want to encourage them to keep growing. When we can do so, helping others grow spiritually is an excellent way to show that we care. How can we do that with people we know?

There is no substitute for a consistent prayer life. Christians are commanded to pray for one another and for the lost. When there is a combined ministry of prayer and the Word, Satan is defeated and the church is established.

Focus on Hope

¹¹Now may our God and Father Himself and Jesus our Lord direct our way to you; ¹²and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also *do* for you; ¹³so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints. ¹ Thessalonians 3:11-13 (NASB95)

These three verses are a benediction asking God's blessing on their relationship and on the church at Thessalonika. Paul started out telling them how much he would like to revisit them and he repeats this in the prayer in the concluding part of Chapter 3. You can read what Paul wanted for these new Christians. In addition to their being re-united he wanted these things for them:

Increase and abound in love for one another:

The starting place for Christians to put their faith into practical application is in the local church. If we cannot develop and nurture relationships that work in the community of faith, then how can we logically expect these to function in a world system that is broken by sin and separation from God. The best witness a church can have is that the members love one another.

If we can do that effectively, then people will be attracted to the church. The opposite is also true. If we do not abound in love for one another, then people will stay away.

Increase and abound in love for all people:

A church that has grown to abound in love for all people will be effective in carrying out the Great Commission. They will be effective in personal witnessing. They will be ministering in their neighborhood and in their families. There will not be a need for the pastor to plead with the congregation share their faith - it will happen naturally.

God would establish their hearts in holiness:

Effective ministry toward those in the church family and effectiveness in reaching out to the lost world around us will do more to make a person careful to protect his or her witness than all the motivational sermon in the world. Each of us need to realize that lack of holiness in the conduct of life is the one thing above anything else that will destroy our witness. This is one reason why Paul wanted holiness for the people in the church at Thessalonika. The other reason is that this characteristic is pleasing to God and will keep the way open for them to continue to be blessed by God.

Sometimes we forget that we should not expect God to bless us if we are oblivious to being obedient to God's expectation for us.

These benefits would abound until Jesus returns:

One of the realizations that is important for all of us is that God is faithful to the end. He has promised to hold us securely in His hand for those who put their trust in Him.