

“Mount Rushmore 1: Love”

1 Thessalonians 3:1-13

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All Scripture quoted from ESV unless otherwise noted

What would be on the Mount Rushmore of a healthy church family? It would be hard to pick just four things, wouldn't it? What would you choose? Maybe evangelism? Discipleship? Sound Biblical teaching and authentic, heart-rendering worship? Avid fellowship and a strong sense of community? Unquestionably, you would want to include love, right? How could a church be strong and healthy if there is no love?

Love warns you about the road ahead, picks you up when you fall down, and helps you become stronger, more capable of traveling the road that yet remains. Perhaps there is no feeling that establishes your sense of self-worth and self-value more than that of being loved. Yet we use the word flippantly, sarcastically, and even manipulatively.

Love may be defined as, “Strong affection for another arising out of kinship or personal ties.”^[1] It is a word that most of us will understand when we hear it, although your understanding of love may be very different than that of the person right beside you. In the name of love, books have been written, songs have been sung, and poems have been authored.

Love features prominently on the Mount Rushmore of any healthy church family and is simple enough to be felt by a child but complicated enough to confound the greatest hearts and minds of the most highly educated among us. Today, we will focus on what we can learn about love from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonian church, and specifically, chapter 3.

Love prepares (1 Thess. 2:20) Paul founded this church but was run out of town shortly thereafter. But he was still concerned about the young church and could hardly stand not knowing how they were doing against the trials they were facing. As such, he sent his coworker Timothy back to them.

Trials are not by chance; they are a consequence. v.4 – “We were to suffer affliction” – All Christians face trials. It's what you signed up for. David Guzik says, “*Afflictions do not show that God is angry with you; they prove that God loves you enough to give the best, not that which is easy. The symbol of Christianity is a cross, not a feather bed.*” Indeed, as James (1:2) says, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.”

Trials are not necessarily due to a lack of faith or due to an imperfect Christian walk. As a follower of Christ, you will face opposition, trials, and difficulties, and Paul's love for the young church prompts him to give them fair warning. He encourages them, in the face of difficulties, to take heart; to choose joy; to hold firm to their faith in Jesus Christ (see also 1 Peter 4:12-13).

Love comforts. It is evident from v.6-10 that Timothy has returned and brought a good report of the young church's faith and love. John Calvin says, "*In these two words [faith and love] he states concisely the sum total of godliness.*" [2] Christian faith and Christian love are so thoroughly intertwined that it ought to be very difficult – perhaps impossible – to separate the one from the other. Like the engine and transmission in your car, both have to be working together in order to get you anywhere.

Your faith does not need to be perfect to be healthy. Indeed, Paul desires to see the young church, so he can (v.10) "...supply what is lacking in [their] faith." Paul loves that he is loved by this church and he knows that their faith is real, even though it isn't perfect.

So, it is for you; you don't have all the answers; you have questions and objections and fears, and that's normal for all of us. When people's faith proves to be less than perfect, instead of rushing to judgment or rushing to dismiss them as fake or weak or somehow 'less', what if you rushed to pick them up when they fall flat on their faith? Seek ways to bring comfort into the lives of your fellow believers in Christ

Love refines. Refining is the process of removing unwanted elements from a substance, making small changes to make something better. It means removing impurities and bringing clarity. Loving others means helping them refine their focus, their love, their Christian faith.

Love, you see, is the logical prerequisite for holiness. In verse 12, Paul prays that God would cause the Thessalonians to abound in love for one another in order that their hearts would be established as holy and blameless before God. The endgame of that holiness is being prepared for the second coming of Jesus Christ. So, do you plan on being with Jesus forever? The only way to be ready for that is to pursue holiness, and that is contingent upon you loving others.

Being holy means loving all people. If love is only extended to those who love you back, it is a cheap trinket at best, and an awful weapon at worst. It is a self-sharpening blade that can be used to plunge into the heart of those who you dislike, or that can be used to help bring healing to weary souls.

"To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything." (Author Timothy Keller).

Do you know what it's like to be loved? Maybe you feel like there's no one out there that even cares about you, let alone loves you. Life has taken you from one failure to another failure; from one disappointment to an even bigger disappointment, and you've started to wonder if anyone loves you; if it's even possible to be loved.

"Love isn't a feeling; it's a practice" (Eric Fromm) God loves you with a perfect love! After all, He's had a lot of practice. God loved you so much that He gave up everything for you. He suffered for you; He was bullied and spit on and made fun of for you; he was rejected and marginalized and judged by people who didn't even know Him – all so you could know Him and

love Him, too. The crazy thing is, He knew that was going to happen, but he came anyway. He is a friend to the friendless, a brother to the only child, and a father to the orphan.

God knows all of your failures and all of your shortcomings and all of your flaws (as you see them), and He still loves you; And He still chose you. Of course, when you choose Him, your troubles will not go away – you may have even more troubles than before – but your fear – your insecurity – your hopelessness – can be washed away, as His love washes over you

How is God preparing you? How is God comforting you? How is God refining you? And how are you preparing... comforting... and refining others? This is what it means to love, and to be loved. Let God love you, and extend your love to one another, as well as to all people [Luke 6:35]

Love is, without question, one of the 'big four' on the Mount Rushmore of a great church. As we love each other . . . and pursue holiness . . . and prepare for Jesus' return . . . our church is going to get stronger and healthier than it's been in a long time.

[1] <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/love>

[2] https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/guzik_david/StudyGuide2017-1Th/1Th-3.cfm?a=1114001

DIG IN!

Here are some farm-fresh questions that will help you to personalize and apply this morning's message.

- 1. When have you faced trials or afflictions? How did you manage these trials? How does your Christian faith affect your perspective on trials?**
- 2. When you share your faith and testimony with others, why do you think it is important to help them understand there are difficulties associated with being a Christian?**
- 3. Where's that cool, stone manatee at?**
- 4. What excuses have you allowed to prevent you from sharing the gospel message? What will you do in order to prevent these (or other) excuses to stop you?**
- 5. How does knowing that Jesus could return today encourage you to pursue holiness? What does that pursuit look like in your life? Is it a competition? Why or why not?**
- 6. Paul has had a lot of positive things to say about the faith of the believers at Thessalonica. What do we learn about their faith from 3:10? How could that encourage you in your own faith?**
- 7. In 3:10, what two things does Paul say he prays for?**

8. **How would you paraphrase verses 12-13, using your own words? How are the topics in these two verses related? How do you know this?**
9. **What do you love about your church family? (Attach as many extra pages as necessary)**
10. **What have you learned through your personal time of Bible reading this week?**