

Sermon Faith and Love

1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Rev Dr Jos M Strengholt

Introduction

Last week, we saw that if our desire is to serve our Lord God, we *will* suffer the consequences. We *will* all to a certain extent be treated as our Lord Jesus Christ was treated. It is so easy, when circumstances are difficult, to let our faith in our Lord Jesus slip away. Why suffer for our faith? Well, because faith in Jesus Christ connects us with the Lord of life - with the one who guarantees eternal life. But in spite of this, Christians sometimes lose courage, especially if they focus only on this life and if they forget that one day, our Lord Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead.

St Paul was worried about the Church in Thessalonica. These were young Christians, and they were being persecuted. Would they hold on to the faith? In the beginning of his letter, Paul said to the young church that he remembered before God 'your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ'. (1Thes 1:3)

In the part of the letter that we have read today, this same theme - of faith, love and hope, is central again.

1 You stand firm in the Lord faith and love

Paul rejoices because the new church in Thessalonica was 'standing firm in the Lord' (1 Thes 3:8). 'Standing firm in the Lord' must be something very important for Christians. How can we do this?

In the Old Testament there is a beautiful very short story of a hero, Shammah, who 'stood firm in the Lord'. **Let me read 2 Sam 23:11-12.**

When the Philistines banded together at a place where there was a field full of lentils, Israel's troops fled from them. But Shammah took his stand in the middle of the field. He defended it and struck the Philistines down, and the LORD brought about a great victory.

Problems came, thugs came to attack the land, and most Israelites fled as they were

afraid. But Shammah took his stand in the middle of the field. He did not flee because he believed: this is my land; this is the land God promised to us; this field of lentils is mine. So he stood firm and the Lord made him victorious. 'We shall not, we shall not be moved...'

How would you defend your home, your family if thugs would attack? How would you 'stand firm'? If it would be for my house or for lentils, I would happily run away; in Old Testament terms, there was of course more to the issue of the land - it was the land God had given to Israel. Shammah's fight was a battle for the will of God, because of his faith in the promises of God.

Just like the young believers in Thessalonica 'stood firm'. Not for their house, not even for defending their life. Nothing could move them from their faith-conviction. They had come to faith in the Lord, and they were strongly decided to follow him at all cost. This was a serious issue: they were persecuted, as we have seen in previous weeks. But they were not prepared to be intimidated.

St Paul had been very worried about the believers in Thessalonica, but now he was relieved. He knew they took a strong stand as Christians. How did he know this? He had sent his colleague Timothy to Thessalonica, for finding out how they were doing. Timothy had now returned to Paul, and reported about their faith and their love. So he knew that they were strong in the Lord on the basis of Timothy's testimony about their faith that was most eloquently expressed by their love.

The Reformer John Calvin in his *Commentary on 1 Thessalonians* said about these words 'faith and love':

In these two words [the apostle] states concisely the sum total of godliness. All who aim at this double mark are beyond the danger of error for the whole of their life.

Faith and love are the key-issues for us, if we like to stand firm as Christians. And these early Christians had much of both. If we have real

faith and real love, our life is secure. It is hidden with Jesus Christ in God.

2 We should always increase our faith and love

Paul knows that these people in Thessalonica are firm in their faith and love. Just as you may well stand firm in the Lord because of your faith and love.

But this is not a reason for pride. It is because God works in your life. He gives you strength. And he gives you friends and fellow Christians to stand beside you to help you be strong.

If you think of yourself that you have this faith and this love, this is really no reason for sitting back to relax. In our life with God, we are never ready, never finished. Very interesting is that Paul knows that the Thessalonian Christians stand strong in the Lord because of their faith and love. But what does Paul want to do? He wants to 'supply what is lacking in their faith' (vs. 10) and he prays that the Lord will make their love overflow (vs. 12) They are strong because of faith and love, but their faith and love must increase, be better, be more perfect.

Paul wants to 'supply what is lacking in their faith.' What does he mean with this? The Greek word for *supply* (*katartizo*) means 'to make complete, fit, sound; repair; prepare things for their full destination.' The Greek writer Polybius and others also use the word for military and naval preparation, like supplying an army with provisions.

This suggests that their faith was fine, but it needed to be better, more, stronger.

But what was actually still 'lacking in their faith'? Maybe they had wrong views of the return of Christ, as we will see in the coming weeks. Or they were somewhat unruly, as we will also see later. If you are really blessed with faith and love, there is still much room for improvement.

Therefore we come to church, we participate often in holy communion, we study the Bible, both in church and at home, we pray.

Our love must also grow, so much that it overflows. This means, that we do not only love our family and friends, maybe even other church members, but all people. St

Chrysostom, in a *Homily on 1 Thessalonians*, said

Loving one person and showing indifference to others is characteristic of purely human affection; but Paul is telling us that our love should not be restricted in any way.

This love is not something vague; it is very concrete. It is treating other people in the manner that you like them to treat you. It is serving other people as you like to be served; it is giving to other, just as you like to receive. It is doing what God asks of us.

Love is the mark of a Christian; it is the solid proof of our faith; Faith without love is worthless; true love proves that we have true faith. Faith that not expresses itself in love for God and our neighbour is not true saving faith.

We can recognize strong Christians by looking at their faith and their love. Do you have real faith in God? Real love for God and other people? Great! Because faith and love are the two ingredients that make our lives blameless and holy before our God and Father, St Paul says in verse 13.

Holiness is not something vague that is only attained by desert monks or types like Mother Teresa. It is just as concrete as faith and love. It is a lifestyle at the service of other people, motivated by faith in God and love for God. It is the complete dedication to God above all, and to other people as well.

This real faith and this real love must increase and be purified all the time. So true followers of Jesus Christ are always aware that their present faith and their love are not perfect yet.

3 What must we do to grow our faith and love?

The passage that we have read gives some homework to us all. It shows the importance of pastoral care. **Read 1 Thes 3:8 again.**

St Paul is zealous for the souls of the believers in Thessalonica. He sees it as a matter of life and death. Concern for the solid faith and the love of those entrusted to him is his very life.

This taking care of the faith of our fellow-believers has two aspects. It has to do with the content of the faith – what we believe. And it

has also to do with the act of trusting God. Both are very important.

And our Christian lifestyle of loving God and our neighbours is closely linked to this.

This taking care of other believers is, by the way, not a job for priests alone. We are all called to taking care of our fellow believers.

Paul prayed night and day for the Thessalonians. Teaching the truth, helping people forward on their pilgrimage with God, must be embedded in prayer for one another. Paul prayed day and night – was this the rhythm of the evening and morning prayers of the synagogue? We Anglicans also have our morning and evening prayers. Do we pray daily for each other?

Paul prayed day and night for these people. If you think that you are too busy to pray for each other, then do not forget that in a previous chapter (in 1 Thes 2:9), Paul said that he not only prayed night and day, we he also worked night and day! To me this suggests that his prayers day and night were really rather organized. Maybe he set apart a time during the day and a time in the evening. A very good habit.

Conclusion

Let us conclude... For standing strong in the Lord – for being a type like this Old Testament hero Shammah who defeated all attacks - we need strong faith and deep love. That is not perfect faith and love, because our faith and love must always grow and become better - so perfection will be attained after we have met with our Lord in eternity; then our faith and love will be perfect. But even today, this is the goal of our pilgrimage through life.

Here in Church, we have a responsibility to each other – to help our faith and love grow. That is why we come to church, to learn together. That is why we have studies together. Our men's meeting, and soon also a meeting for women. We also hope to be able to start a home group in one of our homes soon. To enjoy and encourage one another. If you like to participate, please let me know.

As an expression of our love, we also support the building of churches in Ethiopia, the Church of the Deaf in Old Cairo, and the Sudanese social project in Kilo 4½. Please help us to support those projects! Love is not just a feeling – it is above all a lifestyle of helping others where we can.

And we also pray for each other, that our faith and love will grow.

Let us commit to each other – that we will help each other to be strong in our Lord. I need your help and support. Even in hard days, we steadfastly follow our Lord. We pray, we believe, we love. And as we do so, as we do what we can, our God and Father will strengthen our hearts and make us blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." (vs. 13).

+In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen