

A New Years Revolution

A Study of 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

Big Idea: Answers may come disguised as opportunities.

Good morning! Have you had something happen to you that changed the way you looked at things?

Ashley had a drug problem. Now 18, she had been addicted to Meth for about 3 years. She had lied, stolen and manipulated her family in an attempt to first hide her habit, then to feed her habit. She had been to rehab twice. Several weeks had passed since mom and dad had kicked her out of the house and changed the locks to protect their younger children. On the day I met with Ashley, she wanted to go home. She was tired of living on the street and promised not to use drugs again. Her and her mom came to see me to work on a plan that both could live with. After about 2 hours of haggling back and forth, it slipped out that 3 years earlier Ashley had accused her step father of abuse; and mom didn't believe her. Just a short time later Ashley began using Meth.

That revelation changed me. It caused me to look at the situation differently. I wondered if going home was actually a good thing. It explained some deep-seated issues between mom and daughter that hadn't made sense.

That day revolutionized the way I thought. Revolution can be defined as "a fundamental change in the way of thinking about something; a change of paradigm."

Ashley's revelation changed the way I viewed her; it changed the way I viewed the situation; it changed the advice I was giving. But just as importantly, it changed the way I looked at drug use

and its consequences. I knew about drug use and its consequences, but on this day I experienced it through the eyes of a hurting teenager. I am a different person today because of that interaction.

Our study this morning is not about drug use; it's about a revolution. It's about looking at things through a different lens. It's about thinking differently than we did before. It's about changing our paradigm.

Our text this morning comes from 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13. If you have a Bible, I invite you to turn there. This first letter to the Thessalonian church is thought by many scholars to be the first letter Paul wrote. After spending probably several weeks or months in Thessalonica, Paul and his fellow missionaries were driven out of the city. But they left a church there. And Paul was starting to worry about the new young church. So, when the worrying got the best of Paul, he sent Timothy to Thessalonica to check on the church. In 1 Thessalonians 3:1, ► Paul writes,

^{NIV} **1 Thessalonians 3:1** So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. ² We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith,

And once there, Timothy finds good things.

Paul continues, ►

^{NIV} **1 Thessalonians 3:6** But Timothy has just now come to us from you and has brought good news about your faith and love.

Paul is thrilled! Look at verse 8. ►

^{NIV} **1 Thessalonians 3:8** For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. ⁹
How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of
our God because of you?

Paul is both surprised and encouraged. So in verse 11, Paul pens a short prayer. It is this short
prayer I want to look at this morning. And as we look at this prayer, ask yourself, “Am I ready to
pray like this?”

So, let’s read this short prayer out loud together. ►

^{NIV} **1 Thessalonians 3:11** Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear
the way for us to come to you. ¹² May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for
each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. ► ¹³ May he strengthen your
hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when
our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. ►

In ► this short prayer, Paul prays for 3 things.

First, Paul prays for ► community.

^{NIV} **1 Thessalonians 3:11** Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear
the way for us to come to you.

He wants to see the Thessalonian people. He sent someone and he wrote this letter, but neither
of those things provided the community Paul was looking for. He wanted to see them in person-

face to face. Throughout this entire letter, Paul makes it very clear he misses these people and he wants to see them. And Paul lists at least 2 reasons he wants to see them. First, Paul had something to offer. In verse 10, Paul writes,

► ^{NIV} **1 Thessalonians 3:10** Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.

Paul sent Timothy and he sent this letter full of wisdom and instruction, but clearly that does not satisfy Paul's need to be together with the church. He had something to offer and he wanted to be there in person.

But there is second reason Paul wanted to experience community with the Thessalonian church; he cared about them. In chapter 2, Paul says

► ^{NIV} **1 Thessalonians 2:8** We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.

In that same chapter Paul says he treated the people like a mother and father take care of their children. Paul's underlying desire to be there in person to help their faith was his care for them. Paul had developed quite a relationship with the people in this church. He cared so much for them, he wanted to offer them what he had in the context of community.

And this desire for community caused Paul to ask God to make this face to face reunion possible.

▶^{NIV} **1 Thessalonians 3:11** Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you.

Paul wanted to be with these people, but there were things outside his control

He writes,

▶^{NIV} **1 Thessalonians 2:18** For we wanted to come to you-- certainly I, Paul, did, again and again-- but Satan stopped us.

He wanted God to make a path. He wanted God to do what he couldn't. He wanted God to remove the obstacles that were preventing him from being a part of the community.

What do you think could happen if we asked God to remove the barriers that are keeping us from experiencing Biblical community? ▶We'll come back to that.

The second thing Paul prays for is ▶love.

^{NIV} **1 Thessalonians 3:12** May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.

Paul's prayer for love here is interesting. He isn't praying for love because love doesn't exist. He is praying for love on steroids. He wants their love to increase, even to the point of overflowing. The Greek word for ▶love here is *agape*. We've talked about this kind of love before, so you of you may recognize this definition. *Agape* love ▶is an unselfish and unearned sacrifice for the sake of another person. It's unselfish, meaning I don't get to look for the payday when I love this way. It's unearned, meaning the recipient doesn't have to act a certain way or do certain things to get it. It

is a sacrifice which means it costs me something. That's the kind of love Paul is talking about. And Paul wants this kind of love to abound. He wants it to increase; he wants this attitude to overflow. Now, consider the definition for *agape* love again. What is Paul really asking God to do for them? Be more selfless. Take your love to those who haven't earned it to the next level. It needs to cost you more than it costs you now. That is Paul is praying for. When love increases and overflows in us, it costs us the most for the most undeserving. What might happen to our church and our friends or our neighborhood if we asked God to do that to us? Well, Jesus actually tells us.

As he was preparing his disciples for his death, he told them this:

►^{NIV} **John 13:35** By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Jesus told his disciples that if they unselfishly sacrificed for each other, the world would see. And notice who they were to love- each other. In our verse here, who does Paul list first to love- each other? We are to take care of each other. And our love for each other has far greater implications than taking care of each other. It demonstrates to the non-believing world who we belong to.

Loving each other shows off Jesus.

Several of our Life Groups have had the opportunity to demonstrate love to each other. On one occasion, several life group members delivered food to someone who was literally having a hard time putting food on the table. But when the life group got there, several members of the person's family were there. With tears in her eyes, one of the family members asked one of the life group members, "Why are you doing this?" At that moment, their love for one another was making a statement to an unbelieving world.

At MVBC, we love pretty well. When the need of one of our own is known, we usually act. Through things like Project Turkey, ESL and Sharing Tree, we also seem to be sacrificing for those outside the church. This isn't about learning to love; this is about asking God to grow our love to the next step. Is this a prayer we are willing to pray? Lord, make our love increase and overflow? ► Let's come back to that.

Finally, Paul prays for a ► strengthened heart.

^{NIV} **1 Thessalonians 3:13** May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

The word for ► heart here represents man's entire mental and moral activity, both rational and emotional. It is the place where who we are comes from. When we talk about a revolution or a paradigm shift, this is where that shift takes place. The word ► strengthen here means to firmly establish. Paul is praying that God would firmly establish or strengthen the part of us that makes us do what we do. It's where our faith is matured; it's where our decisions are made. Our heart is the filter for our experiences. Paul is asking God to strengthen it; to establish it; to make it firm.

But be careful. Do we really want to pray for that? Do we want God showing us the dark side of our heart? Do we want God messing with what goes on inside our head that no one hears or sees? How might we be different if He did?

It's an amazing thing to witness. I have a good friend who used to be sad a lot, was full of guilt for past choices, had a very poor self-image and struggled to know what God wanted. But at some point, my friend said, "God, change the dark parts of my heart that make me like this." Through various circumstances and people, I saw this person change. As God revealed the dark places in

my friend's heart, they allowed God to replace those places with His grace. Today, my good friend is a different person. Not because of will or determination or information- all of which helped. My friend's difference is the result of a heart that says, "Change the parts of me that make me who I am." It sure isn't always fun or pleasant though when we ask God to show us the sinful side of ourselves.

► So there are the 3 things Paul prayed for: community, love and strength.

So, what do we do with this? I would like to offer you 2 challenges this morning. First, commit to praying this prayer on a regular basis in 2008. I believe if we prayed this prayer, it would revolutionize our thinking. It would change the way we look at community and love and standing firm. Maybe praying for all 3 is biting off more than you can chew and so you choose to pray for one right now. But I don't think we can even comprehend what God might do in our lives and our church if we earnestly and consistently asked God for community, love and strength? And to be honest, that's the risk. What would it look like if we prayed for these things and God answered?

The answer to that question is my big idea this morning: Here it is:

► Answers may come disguised as opportunities.

Let me show you.

If you prayed asking for real Biblical community, will the church all of a sudden become a big happy family or might He give you an opportunity to help create Biblical community by joining a Life Group? If you pray and ask God to remove the obstacles keeping you from being more involved in community, will God clear your schedule or might he give you opportunities to reevaluate some priorities. If I pray for Biblical community, will God give me 10 new friends or might he give me opportunities to be friendly. You see, answers may come disguised as opportunities.

If you pray and ask God for love that overflows, will God make you feel all warm and fuzzy inside or might He present you with an opportunity to be more selfless and sacrificial than you ever have before? If we pray for love that overflows, will God drop a million dollars in our lap to feed the poor or might He ask you to stretch a little further? You see, answers may come disguised as opportunities.

If I pray for a strengthened heart, is God going to make a spiritual giant or might I find myself in situations where I need strength? If I pray and ask God to establish me in the faith, will I all of a sudden feel strong or might God show me some things I need to learn or do. You see, answers may come disguised as opportunities.

So, if you are ready for a revolution, try praying this prayer. But I said I had 2 challenges. My second challenge is this: pray this prayer in the context of a Life Group. I seldom plug Life Groups when I get a chance to speak, but it seems appropriate this morning. A commitment to pray for community, love and strength seems most appropriate in Life Groups. A Life Group is a small group of people that get together regularly to do what the first church did- worship, connect, grow and serve together. It seems to me that if we begin asking God for community, love that overflows and a changed heart, Life Groups are the first place these opportunities present themselves. In this mornings bulletin, there is a list of Life Groups that will be starting up in the next couple of weeks.

Are Life Groups the only place people experience community, love and strength? No! Can you pray this prayer in 2008 and not belong to a Life Group. Of course. But at MVBC, Life Groups are where these things will most likely occur. So, I would challenge and encourage you to pray this prayer and to pray it in a Life Group. And when answers come disguised as opportunities,

together we experience real life face to face community; together we experience a love that is overflowing for each other and everyone else; and together we experience a strengthened heart that causes us to stand firm. I promise you, this would revolutionize us.

Will you pray with me?

“God and Father, will you clear the way for us to experience true Biblical community. Will you make our love increase and overflow for each other and everyone else. Will you strengthen that part of us that makes us tick? And Father, when you answer this prayer with opportunities for community, love and strength, please give us the faith and courage to obey! Amen.”