

Good morning, Moon Valley!

We are continuing our sermons series titled, □ “Living Like He’s Coming.” It is based on a study through the New Testament letter of 1 Thessalonians.

The text we’re studying today is □ 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13. From this text, we are going to learn an important way to live life more abundantly.

Of course, we all want to live life more abundantly. And Jesus himself wants that for us. In John 10:10, Jesus says,

ESV John 10:10 . . . I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

The rub comes in defining what the abundant life is and how we can experience it.

A common cultural perspective is that the abundant life consists of having the resources to live independently, comfortably, securely, with plenty of room for the pursuit of self-care and recreation. And you get there through working in a fulfilling and lucrative career.

Sounds good.

But that is not what the apostle Paul has in mind in our text, or anywhere else in Scripture for that matter.

In our text, Paul models for us an entirely different approach to living abundantly. I have summarized what Paul models. Here’s Paul’s idea of living it up: □ Invest and rejoice in the spiritual well-being of others.

That's the big idea I draw from the text: Invest and rejoice in the spiritual well-being of others.

Before you chalk this up as a letdown, I encourage you to suspend judgment until you walk with me through the text to see how I came up with it. You may just find Paul's joy to be infectious and convincing.

But before going through the text, let me summarize the historical background. During Paul's second missionary journey, Paul and his ministry partners Silvanus and Timothy traveled to the ancient Macedonian city of Thessalonica. Upon arrival, they found a synagogue of the Jews. Paul went to the synagogue and reasoned from the Scriptures, arguing that Jesus is the Christ, the Jewish Messiah, the long-awaited Savior, the blessing of Abraham, the descendant of David.

Many believed and, thus, the church of the Thessalonians was born.

This success eventually prompted a backlash from Jews who remained unpersuaded. They mobilized a mob against Paul, seeking to cancel his person and ministry. Concerned for the lives of Paul and his partners, the new believers in the Thessalonian church sent them away by night to Berea.

Within just a few months of leaving Thessalonica, Paul writes a letter to the people in the church there. It's the letter we are now studying, First Thessalonians.

We learned last week that Paul is agonizingly concerned about the spiritual well-being of the believers in Thessalonica. He views them as his own spiritual children who are vulnerable. When Paul left, they surely experienced much the same affliction Paul did. Paul was concerned that, through the affliction, the believers might be tempted by Satan to abandon the faith, to give up on following Jesus.

Paul longed to make a return trip to Thessalonica to encourage and fortify his spiritual children in their affliction, but Satan had hindered him. So, Paul sent Timothy in his place.

Timothy went to Thessalonica and then returned to Paul, giving a report on how the believers in the church were doing. Our text was written by Paul in response to the news Timothy brought. In 1 Thessalonians 3:6, Paul writes,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 3:6 But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you—

Note carefully the content of the “good news” concerning the Thessalonians. It is about their “faith and love.” Two vital signs of spiritual well-being are faith and love; therefore, when they are present, it is good news.

The good news is not about their health and prosperity. It is not about their comfort and freedom. It is not about their happiness and social stature. It is not about their education and resourcefulness. These are all good things but have no necessary connection to one’s spiritual well-being.

Paul is rejoicing in their spiritual well-being, which is evidenced by their faith and love.

In this context, the faith in view is not a description of the single moment they believed in Jesus for eternal life; rather, it describes their

continuing reliance on Christ—something that deepens and matures.¹ It is not the solitary act of faith leading to eternal salvation; it is the ongoing virtue of faithfulness in following Christ, leading to spiritual growth and ultimately to reward.²

The love in view is a Christlike love. It is not a feeling; rather, it is a decision to sacrificially seek the best interests of others.

Paul continues in □ verses 7 and 8, saying,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 3:7 for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith.
8 For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord.

Paul says he is □ “comforted” through their faith. The original Greek word could also be translated, “encouraged” or “cheered up” or “relieved.”

But Paul goes further when he says, □ “For now we live.” Clearly, Paul does not intend to say that he and his partners are alive physically because that much is obvious.

Paul’s point is that he and his partners are now living abundantly. The quality of their lives is enriched. We might even say they are living it up.

And notice this abundant living is not defined as the absence of distress and affliction because Paul says they are living abundantly □ “in , , , distress and affliction.”

¹ Ellingworth, Paul, and Eugene Albert Nida, *A Handbook on Paul's Letters to the Thessalonians*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1976), p. 61.

² BDAG.

While Paul's abundance is not conditioned on the presence or absence of distress and affliction, it is conditioned on something else. Paul says, "For we now live, \square *if* you are standing fast in the Lord." If the Thessalonians are standing fast, Paul's life is abundant. Paul's abundance is tied to their faithfulness.

This is not an unhealthy codependency. It's what happens when you are invested in the spiritual well-being of others. Paul had gone to great lengths, first to lead the Thessalonians to faith in Christ through evangelism, and then to nurture their growth in Christ through discipleship. These are his spiritual children whom he loves dearly. The abundance of his own life is tied to their spiritual well-being.

Believing parents get this. My own experience of abundance is tied to the spiritual well-being of my kids and grandkids. When their faith soars, my heart soars. If their faith is wrecked, my heart is wrecked.

Part of the reason for this is that there is so much at stake. Let me try to illustrate.

Let this ray represent a person's life. Given our biblical text, let's say it is an ancient Thessalonian believer whom Paul had led to Christ. The person's life has a beginning—point A on the left—when that person was conceived. But it has no end; it extends infinitely to the right. According to Scripture, all people will live forever.

Now, let point B represent the moment the person dies physically. As such, the A-B segment represents the person's life on earth.

Now, let's consider two possible investment options.

Option □ number 1 is to invest in this person such that they are enriched for the rest of their earthly life, but not beyond it. That would be a temporal investment.

Option □ number 2 is to invest in this person such that they are enriched for the rest of their entire life, into eternity. That would be an eternal investment.

Which is the better investment?

Paul chooses option 2, which is perfectly understandable. Eternal investments afford the greatest return. Eternal investments are the greatest good we can do for someone.

What would be the greatest, most loving thing Paul could do to enrich this Thessalonian's entire life into eternity? The answer is: Invest in his or her spiritual well-being. Because one's spiritual well-being on earth counts forever.

When Paul led this person to faith in Christ, this person's life changed forever. They will spend eternity in heaven with the Lord.

And when Paul helped this person grow spiritually toward Christlikeness or godliness, this person's life changed forever. They will be rewarded in heaven for their godliness and experience the joy of that reward forever.

What if Paul had chosen instead to invest only in their physical well-being on earth? To feed them, to clothe them, to house them, to treat their illnesses, and to teach them healthy habits of eating and exercise.

That would certainly be a good and loving thing. But the primary benefit of this investment would be realized only in this present life and not beyond it. It would be a temporal investment.

In 1 Timothy 4:7-8, Paul explains to his ministry partner, Timothy, the greater benefit of eternal investments, saying,

ESV 1 Timothy 4:7 . . . train yourself for godliness; 8 for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.

Paul is not dismissing the value of one's physical well-being. He says, "bodily training is of some value." Taking care of one's body is valuable. But it is a temporal investment. It's not going to do you much good after you die.

Paul's point is that eternal investments, such as training for godliness, are more valuable in every way, both in this life and in the life to come.

Let's revisit the big idea that Paul models: Invest and rejoice in the spiritual well-being of others.

As I thought about this idea, it occurred to me that our culture has no particular problem when Christians invest and rejoice in the *temporal* well-being of others. For example, we can give to the poor. We can feed the hungry. We can heal the sick. We can comfort the brokenhearted. These are welcomed or at least tolerated.

It is when Christians invest and rejoice in the spiritual well-being of others that we're much more likely to get pushback. For example, when we share the gospel. When we evangelize. When we show from Scripture that Jesus is the only way. When we suggest that some things are absolutely true. When we teach and encourage the application of

biblical principles that fly in the face of what is popular. It is then that we are more likely to be cancelled or labeled hateful, narrow-minded, bigoted, or phobic.

Why is it that our culture is okay with temporal investments but not eternal ones?

I suppose there are number of reasons, including that some professing Christians try to make eternal investments in a needlessly offensive way.

I suspect the bigger reason, however, is spiritual. In the immediately preceding context, we saw last week that Satan is actively involved in this world, hindering Paul's efforts to make eternal investments, and trying to use affliction to shipwreck the faith of the Thessalonian believers.

Wouldn't it make sense that Satan would concede temporal investments and oppose eternal ones? Moreover, wouldn't it be a good strategy for him to dupe Christians into thinking that making temporal investments is enough?

We have all heard and maybe some have embraced the idea that all I need to do as a Christian is to love others through kindness and good deeds and let my life do the talking.

The idea has a ring to it.

But the late theologian, Elton Trueblood challenges this idea when he writes, "There are people who say they do not need to make a vocal witness, because, as they express it, they 'just let their lives speak.' This

appears as humility, but is really self-righteousness. No person's life is good enough to speak with any adequacy."³

Somewhere along the line, investing in the eternal well-being of others is going to involve words—words spoken or written to convey the truth of God's word. Of course, we want the way we live to back up what we say. But we're still going to have to say something.

What if Jesus came, was kind and loving toward everyone, died on the cross, rose again, but said nothing—nothing about our need to believe in him for eternal life, nothing about being the way the truth and the life, nothing about the believer's need to abide in him, nothing about storing up treasures in heaven, nothing about how to take up our cross and follow him—what good would that do?

To be Christlike is to make eternal investments in the spiritual well-being of others through deeds **and** words.

Let's return to our text in □ verses 9 and 10, where Paul says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 3:9 For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, 10 as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

Here in □ verse 9, Paul is rejoicing in the spiritual well-being of the Thessalonians. It brings Paul and his partners so much joy that they cannot possibly thank God enough for it.

³ Quoted by Fadling, Alan. *A Year of Slowing Down: Daily Devotions for Unhurried Living* (p. 223). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

When was the last time you felt so much joy that you were at a loss for words and could not imagine how to thank God enough for it? This is the kind of joy that can come from investing in the spiritual well-being of others.

Here in □ verse 10, Paul touches on a couple of ways he would like to further invest in the spiritual well-being of the Thessalonians.

First, Paul and his partners pray for their spiritual well-being. That they do so “earnestly night and day” suggests that this is not just a perfunctory, one-time thing. It is a habit.

Second, Paul and his partners want to see them face to face to supply what is lacking in their faith. At first blush, this may sound impolite, until we realize that Paul is using the term faith to describe not the *act* or *quality* of faith, but the *content* of faith—that which is believed.⁴ The suggestion is simply that the new Thessalonian believers have more to learn about the things of God. And Paul is anxious to teach them so their spiritual well-being may be enriched.

There is something lacking in everyone’s faith. That is why we continually study and apply the Scriptures to become more complete in our faith. It is an eternal investment in our spiritual well-being.

In □ verses 11 and 12, Paul begins a prayer for the Thessalonians, demonstrating what he said he’s been doing earnestly day and night.

ESV 1 Thessalonians 3:11 Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, 12 and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you,

⁴ BDAG.

Paul prays, asking God to enable his ministry team to reunite with the Thessalonians that they may invest in them, bolstering their faith.

He also prays that the Lord would enable the Thessalonians to increase and abound in love in two directions. First, love □ “for one another,” which includes loving fellow believers within the church. And then love “for all,” which includes loving non-believers outside the church.

Why does Paul pray that God would enable them to love?

We might say that Paul wants them to love because it is commanded in Scripture and represents the greatest Christlike virtue. And that would be true.

But it is not the full picture. Paul also wants his spiritual children to love, not only because it would be obedient and Christlike, but also because it will serve them well both in this life and at Christ’s coming, when the Lord will reward believers for what they have done.

Paul explains this is in □ verse 13, where he gives this reason for loving:

ESV 1 Thessalonians 3:13 so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

The phrase “blameless in holiness” may sound like a description of sinless perfection. Thankfully, it is not. Otherwise, none of us would look forward to Christ’s coming. Because we all sin.

In this case, being “blameless” is the functional equivalent of being approved for reward. The term, “holiness” describes a quality of life expressed in careful obedience to God.⁵ The general idea, then, is to be worthy of reward based on obedience. That’s what Paul wants for his spiritual children. Paul prays for their spiritual well-being. He wants them to live abundantly.

And their reward becomes his reward. When they flourish, he flourishes. The abundance of his own life is tied to their spiritual well-being.

And that brings us back again to the big idea, which is the answer to the question, how do we live life more abundantly? The answer is: □ Invest and rejoice in the spiritual well-being of others.

How do we apply this to our lives today?

The possibilities are legion. Let me mention just two.

First, we could follow Paul’s lead in praying. Paul prayed for the opportunity to make an eternal investment in others. He prayed for their spiritual well-being. He made a habit of it, praying earnestly day and night.

We can, too.

We could start with the people God has put right under our noses: family members, friends, neighbors, coworkers. For those who are not believers, we could pray that they might come to believe in Jesus for eternal life. For those who are already believers, we could pray that

⁵ Friberg.

they might grow in Christlikeness, living a life worthy of reward at Christ's coming.

And we could ask God to give us an opportunity to make an eternal investment in their spiritual well-being.

You may be wondering, "Bob, how could I possibly invest in the spiritual well-being of another? I don't feel qualified."

That leads to the second suggestion. It's something that just about everybody can do.

Invite somebody to church.

You can bring life by bringing someone with you.

Studies continue to show that 80% of those who attend a church for the first time were invited by someone.

At our Inspire congregational meeting on January 28, the elders asked what we could do to make it easier for you to invite someone to Moon Valley. One suggestion was to provide an invitation that you could use.

We're on it. Soon we will be providing invitations, both digital and printed, that you can use to invite someone to Moon Valley for Easter, which is sneaking up on March 31.

Inviting someone may sound like a little thing, but it is not. Think of the possibilities.

What if the person you invite comes to faith in Christ? That person's life is changed forever. They will spend eternity in heaven with the Lord.

What if the person you invite grows spiritually toward Christlikeness? That person's life is changed forever. They will be rewarded in heaven for their Christlikeness and experience the joy of that reward forever.

And through their abundance, *you* will live. As Paul does. Abundantly. And wouldn't that be cause for rejoicing?

Let's pray. Lord, bring to mind those for whom you want us to pray. Please give us an opportunity to make an eternal investment in their spiritual well-being. And give us the courage to take it. Amen.