

**Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time***

## **The Marks of a Faithful Congregation**

Scripture: 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5

Code: 80-201

### The Marks of a Faithful Congregation

Well, tonight I want to draw your attention to a passage that really sort of allows me to say what's on my heart. As I mentioned this morning, you have showered me with so much blessing in my life, you have made my life so rich and so full. And if I could sum up in one simple statement why that is true, it is because of the way in which you respond to the ministry that God has given me here.

I know I'm not deserving of that kind of response. There's nothing humanly that I could do to gain that kind of response. But God, in his grace, and God in his mercy, and God in his sovereign purpose has bestowed upon my life, a congregation of people who respond the way a pastor would hope and pray and wish they would respond.

I think back and some of the biographies that I have read about men who poured their life into churches that in the end devastated them. The Apostle Paul certainly had that experience with the church at Corinth who had a sad, tragic response to his faithful ministry.

I remember reading one time when I was flying over to Australia to minister the story Arthur Pink, the great mind, gifted preacher, Bible student whose ministry was one tragedy after another, so that in the end of his life he found himself in some seaside village in Scotland, a recluse who wouldn't even go out the door, he had been so deeply grieved and wounded and hurt by people.

I think about Charles Spurgeon who after all the power of his ministry was basically voted out of the Baptist Convention and had a broken heart and a grieving spirit 'til his life ended. Jonathan Edwards, in our own country, who was voted out of his church at the height of the great, great preaching ministry that probably had no equal in our history.

Not everyone is blessed with a congregation that responds the way you respond, and I believe the way God would have you respond. As we come to a Shepherd's Conference this week, of course, we'll be talking a lot about the pastor's duty, a lot about our responsibility, and the Bible does say a lot about it. It's almost a part of every facet of the Epistles of the New Testament.

The most serious task that any man could ever be given would be to be a pastor. That is the highest calling imaginable, the one with the greatest demand for excellence, and the greatest level of

accountability. That's why James said, "Stop being so many teachers, for theirs is a greater condemnation." It's a very serious duty. It's a very formidable duty. Humanly speaking, it's an impossible one. And that's why Scripture has so very, very much to say about it.

That instruction begins even in the Gospels as Jesus instructs the disciples in what He expects from them as they go out really to be the first wave of pastors and evangelists and shepherds of His flock. It continues in the Book of Acts where the responsibilities for leadership in the church are continually delineated. And then it goes right on through the Epistles, to finally the Pastoral Epistles themselves. 2 Timothy in Titus.

And then there was even pastoral instruction as far as the shepherd's responsibility is concerned in 1 Peter, as the shepherd is the undershepherd of Christ, he is basically given instruction as to his character and the nature of his ministry. That kind of ministry even continues on into 2 Peter as he has the responsibility to warn his people of err.

And you come even into the Book of Jude and it follows there. You go into the Epistles of John and you see a pastor, namely John, endeavoring to work with his flock. We get into the Book of Revelation and you have instruction for seven churches, and accountability for that instruction being disseminated and bound, as it were, on the minds and hearts of the people by those who are their shepherds.

The New Testament is filled with that instruction. And because of the precision of that instruction and because of the clarity of that instruction, much is made of our obligation as pastors to fulfill that duty. And we are rightly held up to a very high standard. And we are disqualified if we fall short of that standard.

Paul said that his great fear, 1 Corinthians 9:27, was that in preaching to others, he, himself would be disqualified. We understand that. And as I said, I preach a lot on that because there's a lot of it in the New Testament. We, through the years, have said much about the church and much about the ministry in expositing the New Testament because there's so much there. And it's also good for my own heart and for all our pastors to know this and to be continually held to the standard.

And it's good for you to know the standard and to know it well so that you can hold us to that standard. But there's the other side of this relationship as well, and that is the instruction that God has given for you, as the people, in how you respond to the pastor. I have unquestionably, a serious, demanding, formidable duty before God, a duty that I need to fulfill, for which I am held accountable.

You, also, have a duty to fulfill in response. And Scripture does have a lot of say, also, about your responsibility and your duty as you respond to the ministry that God puts before you. For example, in Philippians 2:29, Paul tells the Philippians about Epaphroditus, who was a fellow servant with Paul.

And he says to the Philippians in Verse 29, "Receive him in the Lord with all joy, and hold men like him in high regard."

There is unquestionably a responsibility on the part of a congregation to have high regard for faithful pastors, faithful leaders. "Receive him in the Lord." That is embrace him because of your common knowledge of the Lord, your common life in Christ. "Do so with all joy and hold men like him in high regard."

In Hebrews 13, again, in Verse 7, it says, "Remember those who led you," that would be your shepherds, your pastors, "who spoke the Word of God to you. Imitate their faith," it says. "Imitate their faith." Receive them in the Lord with joy. Regard them highly. Imitate their faith. In Verse 17 of the same chapter, Chapter 13 of Hebrews it says, "Obey your leaders. Submit to them for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. And do your submitting and your obeying with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you."

You don't want to cause your pastor grief, because then that hurts his effectiveness, which restricts his ministry for your benefit. Perhaps the most familiar text dealing with your response is in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13. "We request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction. And that you esteem them highly, very highly in love because of their work."

This is all about regarding them highly, about submitting to them, obeying them, imitating the example of their faith, appreciating them, esteeming them very highly in love because of their work. Because it is the Lord's work that we do, because we are the undershepherds of Christ, not because of personality, not because of personal charm or attraction, but because of an objective evaluation of the centrality of the gospel of the utter importance and priority of the work of the pastor, we are to honor, respect, love, support, appreciate, submit, obey, and follow their example.

And when pastors are faithful to their responsibility and people are faithful to their responsibility, then the church is blessed and the church is powerful. Now this very issue is in the mind of the Apostle Paul in 2 Thessalonians 3, and I want you to turn to it. That's the text that we'll just briefly mention tonight.

"You can feel the shepherd's heart," in Paul, "the heart that he has for his people as he unfolds what he expects from them." Listen to the first five verses of 2 Thessalonians 3. "Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified, just as it did also with you, and that we may be delivered from perverse and evil men; for not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you're doing and will continue to do what we command you. And may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ."

What you have here, again with such a magnificent economy of words, is a summary of everything a pastor would ever want from his people. Really when you've said what's in this five verses, you've summed it all up. It's just an immense, immense text in terms of its implications. You would read it probably in reading through 2 Thessalonians and you might just skip by it and not think deeply about it, but certainly, we ought to, and I trust we will for a few moments tonight.

In this text Paul lays out what he wants from his people, what he has a right to expect, because this would be the will of God. As a shepherd, first of all, he desires to have them prayerful. And I'm piggybacking on Paul tonight. This would be my desire as well. The shepherd wants the prayers of his flock. "Finally brethren," Verse 1, "pray for us. When all has been said and done, in the end, pray for us." Now just think about it. The human assumption would be that if anybody could function without prayer, Paul could. He was immensely gifted, a brilliant mind, the finest possible training in Judaism. He had direct revelation from God, something none of us have outside of Scripture, of course.

We don't have God revealing his Word in our minds, as he did. He was powerful. His preaching was effective. Whole cities were influenced by his sermons to faith and sometimes hostility against the Gospel. He had great, great ability. He had great courage. He had great determination. He had great self-discipline. He had great clear strategy. But with all of his natural ability and all of his ministry opportunity and all of his formidable education and all the revelation that God gave to him and all of his experience and all his refined skills, he could say that that is not the source of my power. That is not the key to effectiveness.

In Colossians 1:29 he says, "For this purpose also," for the purpose of building up the saints, "I labor," he works to the point of exhaustion, "striving according to His power, which mightily works within me." Now you can't feel that power. I can't feel the power of God. People always ask me, "Do you feel the power of God? Do you experience God?" No, I don't feel God. There's no physical way to know that God is working. I know he's working because I see the effect.

It's like the Holy Spirit in John 3. I can't feel the Holy Spirit. He's like the wind. He comes and goes and I don't know where it comes from or where it goes. There's no physical, there's no experiential awareness of that. But I see the effect in transformed lives. Paul saw the impact of the power of God flowing through his life. He was dependent on the Lord entirely for every aspect of his ministry. His frequent pleas for people to pray for him, which he does repeatedly in his Epistles, underline who strongly he leaned on Divine power.

Certainly, the Thessalonians church, to which he's writing here, prayed for him. They were concerned to pray for him, and he wants them to continue to do that. After all, he had prayed for them. He prayed for them frequently, as he did for all of his beloved. Chapter 1 Verse 3, "We ought

always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is only fitting." Much of his prayer was prayers of thanks.

In Verses 16 and 17 of Chapter 2, he actually gives a prayer, "May our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word." That's a prayer. He prayed for them. He greatly longed that they would pray for him.

Chapter 1 Verse 4, he was concerned about their perseverance in the midst of persecution and affliction. And I'm sure that was part of his prayers. Verse 11 of Chapter 1, he says it. "To this end also we pray for you always, that our God may count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power." He prayed for his people.

Certainly, Acts 6 says that we're called to the ministry of prayer and the ministry of the Word. Paul needed their intercession as they needed his. His life was very hard. It was a hard life. It was a difficult life. It was solitary in many ways. It was dangerous. He was always exposed to the plots of both Jews and Gentiles who wanted to take his life. He was usually self-supporting. He preached where he was not wanted, to people who didn't want to hear what he said.

He didn't come into a nice place like this to a bunch of lovely people who came to hear him because they wanted to hear him because they believed in his message. He, inevitably, everywhere he went, preached to people who didn't want to hear him, a message that they resented. He could only succeed in the power of the Lord. That power was granted to him in the course of answering the prayers of his people.

The term "finally" here literally for the rest, loypeson, the Greek, it may, but doesn't have to, mean that the end has come. It could be translated "besides that," as it is in 1 Corinthians 1:16. Beside everything else I've said, beside all that, let me transition into a practical section which concludes the letter. And the first thing I want to say as I conclude this practical section is, "Brethren pray for us.

Literally: pray, parry, periphery, peripheral. It means "around." Pray around us. Surround us with prayer. Boy, what a great injunction that is. Surround me with prayer. Present tense; continually pray, continually surround me with prayer. Pray around me continually. Here is the most spiritually strong man, the most courageous, the most devout, the most self-disciplined, the most gifted, with the greatest volume of instruction, the Word of God, both that which had been written in the Old Testament and that which was being revealed in the New. He was used by God above all others and yet he shows his meekness and his humility in his dependence.

And he asks for the prayers of the Thessalonians, who in some ways would be the weakest of saints. And the reason being, Thessalonica was a baby church. It was just a baby church; just new

believers. It's a wonderful reminder, isn't it, that the strongest of the strong need the prayers of the weak. You may think, "Well what purpose is there for me to pray? The pastor is strong. He's certainly stronger than I am."

People sometimes come to me and say, "I'd like you to pray for this and this because I know that your prayers are stronger than mine." That's not true. My God isn't any stronger than your God, and He's not more disposed to hear my prayers than He is yours. And here is Paul, the strongest of the strong, asking for the weak to pray for him. Here he is, this mature man, this mature apostle, asking for a group of new believers, just babies in the faith, to hold him up in prayer.

Here really lies the true greatness of Paul, preeminently gifted and yet utterly dependent on the prayers of his flock, deeply conscious of his personal inadequacy, deeply conscious of his dependence on the power of God which was gained in his behalf by the prayers of his friends. And he has two specific requests. And I understand these, "Pray for us." And these are the two things I'd like you to focus on: Number 1, that the Word of the Lord may spread rapidly. First of all, pray for the success of the message. Pray for the success of the message.

People often ask me, "I'd like to pray for you, but what shall I pray?" I get asked that all the time. "What do I need to pray for?" Answer? Pray for the success of the message. Pray that the Word of the Lord will spread rapidly. The Word of the Lord, by the way, is a phrase used hundreds of times in the Old Testament and numerous times in the New Testament. And it refers to the revelation from God. It refers to Scripture, God's revelation.

It's used also in 1 Thessalonians 4:15 in regard to the rapture, the Word of the Lord is used there. It's God's revelation. What Paul is saying is just pray that the Word of God when preached may spread rapidly and be glorified. His passion was for the success of the Word. I understand that. That's my passion. Somebody said to me this morning, "You always seem to just say the truth and speak the truth and you don't hold back and you just kinda let it go and let it fall where it may." It isn't just that. It isn't that you just preach and let it fall where it may.

You preach with this constant prayer that it may spread rapidly and be glorified, not that it'll just land willy-nilly, but that it'll penetrate effectively. "That it may spread rapidly is from the Greek verb, "trecco," which is the normal Greek word for "run." Pray that the Word of the Lord will run. It reminds me of Psalm 147-15, "He sends forth His command to the earth; His Word runs very swiftly." Well if ever there was a day in the history of the world when the Word of God could run far and wide, it's today, isn't it? Isn't it amazing?

I preach a message here and Serge hears it on the radio station. Somebody in New Zealand hears it on a tape, or somebody in Singapore hears it on a tape, or somebody in Europe hears it over the radio. Somebody in South Africa hears it over the radio. If ever there was time in the history of the

world when the message could run, it's today. And God is truly sending forth His words and they're running swiftly over the earth.

That was Paul's prayer. He wanted the Word, the saving Word, the sanctifying Word to move swiftly, to run, to keep moving, running like a strong runner, swiftly moving over the land without obstruction and without hindrance, making rapid progress. It's essentially the very same thing he had in mind in Ephesians 6:19, "Pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel of which I am an ambassador. Pray for me that I might open my mouth and the Word might go forth with all of its penetrating force."

At the fourth chapter of Colossians, he says, "Pray," Verse 3, "that God may open to us a door for the Word, that that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ," always concerned that the Word go forth, that it go forth with power. 2 Timothy 2:9, you remember Paul said to Timothy, "The Word of God is not bound."

Like any true preacher, he longed for the Word of the Lord to sweep powerfully through the land, to sweep powerfully through the hearts of people, to run as far and wide as it could go. That's the reason you do what you do, the reason you write books so that the Word can run to places where you're not hear. The reason you do radio and tapes or anything like that is that the Word may run, that it may run to the ends of the earth.

And the key, that it would be glorified. What does that mean? That it would be honored by those who hear it. That's the prayer. That it would run unhindered, making progress rapidly far and wide and be honored, admired, accepted, extolled, received with joy and thanks. Believed like a great, powerful, swift runner, the Word moving swiftly to victory, to triumph, to be crowned with the winner's crown.

He's really praying that it would be accepted, that it would be heard and mixed with faith, that it would be believed. In Acts 13 down in Verse 44, "The next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the Word of God. When the Jews saw the crowds they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul and they were blaspheming. Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, 'It was necessary that the Word of God should be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we're turning to the Gentiles.'"

That's not what Paul wanted to see. He had a heart's desire for Israel. He didn't want to see them rejected. He wanted to see them rejected. He wanted to see them accepted. So he prays and he asked his people to pray that the Word of God would run swiftly and be received and glorified just as it did also with you. That everywhere it goes the response would be the way it was with you. I understand that prayer. I understand that prayer.

I pray that as the Word of God goes forth it will do all over the world, all over this country wherever it goes, the very same thing it has done in your life. And you need to pray to that end as well. You need to pray constantly, regularly, faithfully that the Word of God will go forth rapidly and be honored, treated with respect, believed, and obeyed. Paul wanted to see the Gospel penetrate and change lives; a second request.

The first request was for the success of the message. The second request is for the safety of the messengers. In Verse 2, "And pray this, that we may be delivered from perverse and evil men, for not all have faith." At the same time that you're praying for the success of the message, pray for the safety of the messengers. Deliverance is necessarily. This is not for self-preservation. This is not for personal comfort.

Paul himself admitted, "Far better to depart and be with Christ." This is simply a necessary protection so that the ministry can go on and the message not be hindered. There was such great hostility to Paul, such great hostility. I don't really experience that kind of great hostility; although occasionally I do.

Some years ago, not too many, there were some threats being made on my life. The elders of the church went out and secured for me a bulletproof vest, feeling that I was under some threat, and asked me wear that bulletproof vest because they were afraid of what might happen. Nothing has happened. I don't wear a bulletproof vest, in case you're wondering. *(Laughter)* I've never worn it. It's hanging up there as a mute testimony to their affection for me. *(Laughter)*

But Paul had some serious, serious enemies, and so did other messengers of the Gospel, and I'm sure, so do I, and so do all of us. And Paul just prays that the people will petition God for the safety of the preacher, that they would be safe from harm; in this case, be delivered from perverse and evil men. He has in mind probably the situation in Corinth where there was serious Jewish opposition against him.

Perverse is a word that means "out of place," used only hear by the way of people. It usually means something that's out of place, something that's improper, something that's morally insane, that's irrational. And he calls them not only out of place and irrational, but evil. It's a word for malignant, aggressive, wickedness. So Paul wants prayer. He wants prayer for the success of the message and the safety of the messengers, and that means praying for their protection.

Although I was not subject life threatening from some human enemy, it was very encouraging to me when I was going through this life-threatening illness some months ago, to know that you were all praying that God, in His mercy, would spare me. In particular, though, with Paul, he says, "You have to pray that we'll be delivered from perverse and evil men for not all have faith." That's hard to believe, I think, sometimes for new Christians. And the Thessalonians, they were so transformed and



so thrilled with the gospel, they might have assumed that everybody would react to it the way did. It was so wonderful and so life changing and so glorious. But not everybody was like that.

Not everybody is like that. Not all have faith. Not everybody's gonna respond to the truth like you do. There are life-threatening persecutors. Pray for the safety of the messenger. Simply, pray for the preacher. Pray for the success of this message. And pray for the ongoing safety of his ministry. That's what a preacher desires. And I confess to you that you have given me that, and I praise God for it.

Secondly, a pastor wants his people not only to be prayerful, but trusting, trusting. Verse 3, "That the Lord is faithful and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one." This the balance here. You pray for them because there are enemies, not all have faith. There are perverse and evil men who would want to tear down, who would want to destroy. If they don't attack you physically, they attack your reputation. They try to destroy you.

Again, I heard just this morning of some things that were said about me which are utterly untrue, totally untrue. They would be said in an effort to discredit me. They have nothing to do with reality, completely untrue. I made the comment, "When I hear these things I wonder how many other hundreds of things are said about me that I never hear that are untrue?" But in all of this we can be trusting that the Lord is faithful and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.

Remember that when you're praying, you don't want to become anxious. You don't want to become overburdened. You don't want to become fearful, because you want to trust in God and in the faithfulness of God. This is the wonderful balance that's always there. In our prayers is also trust. So we don't pray in panic. We pray in obedience, trusting God to do His perfect will and express His power.

Paul knew by personal experience that God was faithful. He knew by personal experience that the Lord would strengthen and comfort His own in the midst of serious trials. He knew that. And he wanted to remind them of that. They need to trust. They need to believe in the loyalty of the Lord to His own, the loyalty of the Lord to His servants, to His shepherds, to His flock. And furthermore, no matter what happens to Paul the Lord will still protect them.

I think sometimes people must have thought, "If we lose Paul, everything's lost." That's not true. God buries his ministers. But his ministry goes on. And there was a day when Paul died and the Kingdom went on. And so Paul is saying, "In the end you can trust God. You don't have to fear or be in panic or be in despair or despondency or worry. You can leave it with God. The Lord is faithful. Whatever happens to me, He's there. He will strengthen and He will protect you."

You should never be asking, "What's gonna happen to us something happens to Paul? What's gonna happen to us if something happens to John? What's gonna happen to us if something happens to the pastor?" The Lord is there to strength -- that's a good word, "steridzo." That means to establish, to make firm, strong. He's there to strengthen. And he's there also to protect.

In other words, He's never gonna allow the enemy to come against you without protecting you. He's gonna make you strong and He's gonna put a wall around you to guard you from the evil one. That's inner security, strength, and outer security, protection. Here's a great statement, isn't it? The faithful Lord guards His own, strengthening them internally and walling them off externally. He guards them from the enemy. So while Paul wants them prayerful, he doesn't want them panicked, because they have a faithful, faithful God.

What does the pastor then desire for his people? He desires that they be prayerful. He desires that they be trusting. Thirdly, he desires that they be obedient, that they be obedient. Obviously, and I was saying this to our seminary students in chapel this week -- I speak to them in chapel occasionally, and I was addressing the fact that "You, who are preparing for ministry, must realize that you're being called to a proclaiming function." That's what we do. We are proclaimers. That's what we do. We are not CEOs. We are not entrepreneurs. We are not businessmen. We are not fundraisers. We are not public relations agents. We are proclaimers of Divine truth. That's what we do.

I remember one time I was at a certain well-known church and a gentleman was commenting on the ministry of a well-known pastor who had a God-blessed ministry. And he said with some derision, "This is an illustration of what happens to a church when all the pastor does is preach and teach." (*Laughter*) and I stepped back like, "There's something else?"

I reminded our seminary students this week, "You're being trained to be a proclaimer. That's what we do. That's what we do." And because that dominates our life -- because my life is spent in the preparation of preaching and the preparation of teaching, because that's what I do, the response to that becomes critical to me. And the response most desired is indicated by Paul in Verse 4. He desired his people be obedient.

Verse 4, "And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you that you are doing and willing continue to do what we command." Paul says, "I'm confident about you." This is a positive approach based on their past obedience and on the confidence that they were truly in Christ. He says, "We have confidence in the Lord concerning you." He's saying, "We know you're genuinely in Christ. You are real believers."

It's not a vote of confidence in their human nature. It's not a vote of confidence in whatever little group was sort of living leadership to the church. It's not a vote of confidence in the cleverness of

their constitution. It's a vote of confidence in the Lord, who dwelled in them really and truly. It's a vote of confidence in the honesty and integrity of their faith. "I'm confident," he says. "I'm confident because of what the Lord is doing in you, that you're doing and will continue to do what we command."

He is simply saying that, "I'm greatly blessed. I'm greatly encouraged because I believe you're gonna hear and obey what I've taught you." Paul could command. We all command because we have delegated authority. I have no right to command you to do what I want, but I do have a right to command you to do what God says, right?

And Paul had a clear sense of his delegated authority. He understood that he was speaking on behalf of God, the Word of God, and he could speak it with authority. 1 Thessalonians 4:2, he says, "You know what commands we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus." And when the preacher comes before the people, he comes with the authority of the Lord if he speaks the Word of God. What really made Paul's heart glad was an obedient congregation who would do and continue to do what he commanded them from God. That gave him great joy and satisfaction. And that's what ministry is.

Jesus said to the disciples in Matthew 28, "Teach them to observe all things whatsoever I have commended you." I don't know where that got lost. But preachers nowadays are reluctant to command. They're reluctant to speak with authority. This is a day of cool communication. This is a day when everybody's opinion is supposed to be as valid as everybody else's opinion. And many preachers have become wimpy. Maybe it's because they don't have any convictions. But in many cases, they do. They're just afraid to articulate them for fear of being rebuffed. We are commanders.

Paul was instructing Timothy, he said to him, "These things command and teach." And the proper response to a command is what? Obedience. The duty of the people to the pastor is to obey the Word of the Lord that he brings to them. And I, again, will confess, and gratefully so, that it would be hard to imagine a congregation more responsive to the Word of God than this one. In fact, that's true of the extended congregation beyond these walls who hear the preaching and teaching here through tape or radio or some other way. It's so thrilling to me to see the right kind of heart response to the truth of God. You have filled these 30 years here at this church with that kind of response.

Oh of course, there are those who along the way are rebellious or stubborn or obstinate. But for the most part, for the great part, of all the years of ministry here God has blessed this church with an obedient people. What a great, great blessing. The duty of the people then to the pastor's ministry, the right response is to be prayerful, to pray for the success of the message and the safety of the messenger.

To be trusting, that is to believe that God is faithful. And even though something may happen to the shepherd, a faithful God will strengthen you on the inside and protect you on the outside because you belong to him. And then to be obedient when the Word of God is brought to you, to respond by doing and continuing to do everything that is commanded.

There's one more issue here, and that comes in Verse 5, "And may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ." This is the fourth thing we pray for. This is the fourth thing we desire to see out of the congregation. This is the fourth appropriate response and we can simply call it growth or maturity.

Directing your heart into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ is just putting you deeper and deeper in to your relationship with God and Christ. That's what we want to see, spiritual growth, spiritual growth. Sad situation when you see a church where this doesn't happen. Where because of shallow teaching or because they continually get different pastors who maybe go over the same things and there's no long-term depth of ministry, there's all kinds of things that can cause that spiritual immaturity that is so common.

But it's such a wonderful blessing to be in a church where you can watch spiritual maturation taking place, and spiritual growth occurring as intake of the Word, application of the Word, obedience to the Word generates that spiritual growth in the power of the spirit. Paul expected it. "I expect," he says. And that's why I pronounced this benediction that the Lord is gonna direct your hearts into the love of God. In other words, you're gonna become deeper and deeper in terms of your affection for God. You're gonna love God more and more and more and more, moving toward loving God the way He demands to be loved, and He demands to be loved with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength.

Now that's a maturing process. And also, not only that the Lord, you may be directed into the love of God, but that you may be directed into the steadfastness of Christ, that you may become strong like He is. Steadfastness: What does that mean? Endurance, perseverance. You're gonna grow in love for God. You're gonna grow in perseverance and endurance. That's an indication of strength.

For example, I used to be involved in athletics. We used to have football practice would always start in the summer. And to be honest, during the summer we would all languish and loaf and do little of nothing to get prepared. And then we'd hit that August football camp in preparation for the season. And we were weak by physical standards. And everything we did was a maximum effort. And you'd get sick and your muscles would ache. And you would get injured and you have all these aches and pains. I remember it was almost impossible for me to sleep because of the soreness of muscles, and even in your youth when you think you can recover rapidly.

And as the year would go on and the weeks would go on in these preparation-training camps, you would become stronger and stronger and stronger and stronger. And the way it would show up was in endurance. Early on, you couldn't even make it through practice without collapsing. And then you'd become stronger and stronger until you could go through, in some cases, in full strength undiminished. And that was all preparation for what was gonna happen when you got into the fourth quarter.

And in those days, there were four or five of us on our team that played 60 minutes of the football game, and that's a pretty wearying thing. It doesn't happen much nowadays. And you had to have what it took at the end of the game. That was what you were working for. You were working for endurance to be able to endure all of the physical exigencies of that experience for as long as was necessary.

And that's spiritually what Paul longs to see in the lives of his people, an increasing affection for God, an increasing love for God, an increasing desire for God's honor and God's glory. At the same time, increased endurance, increased strength so that you become as steadfast as Christ, against temptation, against trials, against suffering, against disappointment, against sorrow, whatever it might be. That's spiritual growth, spiritual development, getting stronger and stronger and stronger and able to endure more difficult challenges, more difficult temptation. That's what Paul wanted from his people. And you know folks, that really sums it up. Having said that, there's really not much else to say.

Any pastor who will follow the Biblical model would say, "Give me a people who are prayerful. Give me a people who constantly intercede on my behalf for the success of the message and the safety of the messenger. Give me a people who in the midst of this intercession and prayer are trusting God to hear and answer those prayers, and believing that no matter what may happen God will never abandon them, but He'll always be there to strengthen them on the inside and protect them on the outside. Give me a people who don't panic in their prayers, but who are anchored to a faithful God."

That's a worshipping people, a trusting people. "And give me a people who hear the Word of God and do it. Give me a people who are obedient, and give me a people who are growing, who are loving God more and more and more and more, and who are becoming increasingly more like Christ in their spiritual maturity." And as I said, when you are blessed with such a congregation as that then ministry becomes joy upon joy. You have been, as I said this morning, so kind to me in pouring out your love to me, this is my card back to you.

This is how I view you, as a prayerful, trusting, obedient, and growing congregation, and therein is the supreme joy in ministry. And I say from the depths of my heart, "Thank you for allowing this great joy to me and for submitting to the work of the Spirit in your life to the end that you have fulfilled these desires." I am, and always will be, grateful.

"Father, it's been such a joy to be together tonight. Our hearts have been so enriched throughout the day and culminating in this time in the Word. We're so blessed to be a part of this church, of your church worldwide, your true church. But particularly, this local congregation has been such an immense blessing and we thank you and we give you the glory and the praise for the church.

"Yours is all the credit. Whatever has been done here of any spiritual value, You have done it by Your power and through Your truth. Whatever has been accomplished in any life in regard to salvation and sanctification, You have done it. Were it not for grace, nothing would be done. So we give you the honor and the glory. But we're so thankful that You have been specially gracious to us.

"You have blessed us so abundantly and therefore You have called forth from us a more abundant praise, a greater gratitude, a louder thanksgiving which we want to offer to You. Thank you for this blessed and beloved people, and I pray that You would continue to direct them in the path of being prayerful and trusting and obedient, that they would respond to the truth that is commanded from Your Word. And in the responding, they would grow in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Pray in His name, Amen.

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