

Tuesday, July 14, 2020

SERIES: CHARACTER OVER COMPROMISE

SPEAKER: NAT CRAWFORD

TITLE: Standing Firm Pt. 2

Today we are continuing a study of 1 Thessalonians 3, where we're learning how to stand firm, no matter what curveballs come our way. Yesterday, we discovered that the first way to stand firm was to **deepen our faith**. How? Well, we first recognized that we are people of the Word. We are called to **study the Bible**. And we provided some practical tools to help.

But, we can do more. Here is another important way to deepen your faith:

Study the faith of others. What does a doctor do when he encounters a new illness with a patient? He consults the medical journals, records, and forums, to find some other documented case. It helps them know how to help the patient. The same should be true for us. We should look for how other Christians have dealt with the curveballs of life, and how their faith has helped them through. Look for the unique testimonials of individuals with similar problems: marital strife or affairs, job loss, financial setbacks, or serious mental or physical illness. I guarantee there is a Christian out there who has gone through it successfully, only because of their faith. Allow their testimony and advice to help you.

Study apologetics. There's a shock: the apologist telling you to study apologetics. But I'm telling you, in today's marketplace of ideas and competing world views, you should know what you believe and why you believe it. And apologetics - it's a big word - all it means is a defense of your faith; being able to tell people why you believe what you believe. Take time and see if your faith has any legs to stand on. There are classes we teach on apologetics here at the church. You can find them on our website at BacktotheBible.org as well as on our Back to the Bible YouTube channel, and others. If you are interested in getting real answers to the hard questions of life, visit BacktotheBible.org and check out our reading plan called, "Hard Questions, Real Answers." This is a great free resource to give you the answers you need to defend your faith and provide reasons to believe.

So anchor number 1 is: **Deepen your faith**. Let's turn back to Scripture and see what else Paul says, beginning in verse 9.

⁹ How we thank God for you! Because of you we have great joy as we enter God's presence. ¹⁰ Night and day we pray earnestly for you, asking God to let us see you again to fill the gaps in your faith. (Vs. 9-10)

The NLT here doesn't do justice to Paul's words in verse 9. The NASB says, "**For what thanks can we render to God**" This is a better translation because it addresses the awesomeness of

God and the fact that words could not begin to express the gratitude for Gods work. We too should be so speechless to His grace.

But then in verse 10, Paul points out an essential anchor we need to deepen to stand firm:

Deepen your prayer life.

Paul says he had been praying earnestly day and night for his dear friends. He is in a constant stream of prayer as he gets up, as he works, as he prepares his meals, and as he lays down for bed. He is in constant prayer and he prays earnestly: That is with intensity, with depth, with substance, not fancy theological words. It's beyond the "now I lay me down to sleep" or "rub a dub dub, thanks for the grub." This is an ongoing conversation with the Lord of the Universe. We need to be engaged in this kind of conversation with God, day and night, when things are good, and of course, when life throws us curveballs.

In Philippians 4:6-7 (NASB) Paul writes, **"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."**

When you deepen your prayer life, **you get divine peace** in the midst of the curveballs. I encourage everyone to memorize this verse. Tiff and I memorized this verse 7 years ago, as we watched Landon get cut open and battle cancer. We have and continue to cling to God, as our provider of peace in the midst of life's curveballs.

When life's curveballs come, you need to be people of prayer. Let me help you memorize this Philippians 4:6 - 7 in 6 words: **Worry about NOTHING; Pray about EVERYTHING.** Say it with me, "Worry about NOTHING; Pray about EVERYTHING." Again. That's it. Worry about nothing. Pray about everything. Don't worry about life's curveballs. Get anchored. Deepen your faith. Deepen your prayer life.

And friends, pray first, not last. When you deepen your prayer life, **prayer becomes your first and best resource.** When curveballs come, don't immediately call your friends. Don't search Google. Don't shoot a text. Lift your eyes, your prayers, your fears, your hopes, your shattered dreams, up to the God of the Universe. Do it first. Then do these other things.

This is so hard and foreign in American Christianity. We have money. We have doctors. We have counselors. We have credit cards. We have Google. But Christians around the world have God. They have prayers. That's it. It would take a miracle for them to have access to extra money or credit. It would take a miracle for them to have modern health care. They cry out to God and He hears.

I have to share you an amazing story from a personal friend. About once a year, I teach at a Bible college in Mexico. One of the ministry partners in Mexico is Javier. Javier is a man of faith and prayer. A number of years ago, he was driving around with some people from our church. One of the vans would not start. No matter how many times they tried, the van would not start. Javier, not having the ordinary resources, simply walked up, laid his hands on the engine and prayed. The next turn of the key, the van started.

Am I saying, is it wrong to use the resources God has given us through our finances, medicine, counselors and so on? Of course not. Am I saying God will answer every prayer in the way we desire? No. But we can trust He knows what's best. Ultimately, we need to call out to God first.

DISCUSSION:

N: So let's talk with our friends Arnie Cole and Cara Whitney about calling out to God. Arnie, how has your prayer life grown over the years? What's made the biggest impact?

A: Oh man, it has so radically changed over the years. I remember, before I became a Christ follower, and I would sit in church, and some of these old guys would get up and they would just pray. So, you know, it seemed like an hour, but it was probably 10 minutes. And so eloquently and just, it was like, "Man, I could never do that." And then when I became a Christ follower, it just became more and more of a conversation. So, you know, I have lots of conversations during the day with God. It's not only during times of, when you think the plane's going to crash, but it's times when you think the plane's landing, or I have several friends that I call it, praying through the Rolodex; they pray through their contact list. I do that at night. And when you get old, you can't sleep so well. I pray for a lot of people, which is a complete change from when I started as a Christ follower, that's for certain.

N: Yeah. And I think you can hear in people, when they are, I'll say prayer warriors, there's just a certain level of comfort with their ability to talk to God. And like any relationship, the more you get into a relationship, and the more you talk, the more natural it gets, and the deeper it gets. And so for you, you have that posture of praying everywhere, in every circumstance, for anyone and about anything. And I think that's something we all can work on and develop as well.

Cara, you love apologetics. You and I have talked a lot about apologetics and it's one of the things I really appreciate about our relationship. But a lot of people, they hear that word apologetics, and they run the other way, or they don't even know what it means. From your perspective, do you need a degree to understand apologetics?

C: Well, no, because I don't have a degree and I also have a learning disability. But I do have a desire to tell people why I believe what I believe. So for me, it's in the form of a testimony, and my testimony includes a lot of apologetics, because without that, I would not be where I am in my faith. You don't need a degree, but I would ask yourself a couple simple questions. Why are you following Christ? And what made you believe? And maybe the answer is not so easy for you. And that's awesome, because now you can seek those answers, and I guarantee it will deepen your faith. But you do also, I think you can get too head heavy, and the response to Christ comes from your heart. So not all questions are going to have an answer, and sometimes you just have to have faith.

N: Yeah, and I think that is so beautiful, what you just said. You have to be able to have a marriage between the head and the heart. And I remember when I was getting my degree in apologetics, I think it was my mother who said, "You know, at some point that's going to have to come to your heart." And what she was saying was, "It's great to have the answer, and you

should have the answer, but you have to also let it penetrate who you are, transforming your life, and that care and concern for the other people needs to come out.” And I think that really is key. So I agree. You don't need a degree in apologetics to become effective. Rather, you simply just need to know what you believe and why you believe it.

So, to stand firm we need to 1) deepen our faith, 2) deepen our prayer life. The third anchor we'll see in the last 3 verses of 1 Thessalonians chapter 3 (NLT). Paul continues now in prayer.

¹¹ May God our Father and our Lord Jesus bring us to you very soon.¹² And may the Lord make your love for one another and for all people grow and overflow, just as our love for you overflows. ¹³ May he, as a result, make your hearts strong, blameless, and holy as you stand before God our Father when our Lord Jesus comes again with all his holy people. Amen. (Vs. 11-13)

Paul concludes this section of Scripture with a brief prayer. It is worth noting an important theological point here. Verse 11 literally reads, “**Now may Himself, our God and Father and Jesus Christ our Lord, direct our way to you.**” Himself, who is Himself? God the Father *and* Jesus Christ is Himself. Himself is singular, referring to both God and Jesus at the same time; not only that, but the word “direct” is also singular. So here we have two singular case words to describe God and Jesus. In other words, this is a clear indication that God the Father and Jesus are one being, not two. This is Paul's earliest letter, and it is a clear indication of the deity of Christ; very cool and worth remembering.

Here, Paul's prayer consists of two main requests: First is in verse 11: He prays that God would reunite Paul with his dear family in Thessalonica. Throughout this letter, you can see his deep love for them, and his desire to be reconnected with them. Then is verse 12: he writes down his other prayer request, and it is an increase in love – *agape* love. Agape love is that selfless love, that is pure and without expectation. Not only that, but agape is that type of love that is only natural and possible by God, through the Holy Spirit.

It is here in these final verses, we find our final anchor to stand firm: **Deepen Your Love**

We as a society talk a lot about love. It's not uncommon to hear things like “Love Wins”, “All you need is love”, “They just love each other”, “I love Chipotle” or “I love Star Wars”. The word love can have a lot of nuances and implications. Even in Scripture, we find 3 different Greek words translated into the English word love. Again, here Paul uses the Greek agape – the selfless and sacrificial love. But then he identifies two groups that we should deepen, or as Paul puts it “increase and abound” in love.

First, Paul says we should **deepen our love for other believers**. We need to be keenly aware of how we are treating each other. Do we speak to each other with love? Do we act towards each other in love? When we speak and when we act, is it truly love that motivates us, or is it guilt? Is it obligation? Paul here tells us it should be with the motive of love. The Apostle Peter said we are to **love each other fervently from the heart** (1 Peter 2:22).

Part of love can and should mean loving correction and accountability. Jesus said, **“If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.”** There are times when people slip up and act in a blind spot. As believers, we should lovingly point out this blind spot. This is part of love. Also, sometimes we wrong and hurt another believer. We should be quick to repent, which is a sign of love for them. And if we are wronged, we should forgive them willingly and often. So we are to love fellow believers.

Then Paul says we should **deepen our love for all people**. Who exactly are “all people?” Surprise, surprise, it’s **all** people. Remember, Jesus’ words **“Love your enemies”** and **“Love your neighbor as yourself.”** Who is your neighbor? **Everyone:** Non-believers, enemies, agnostics, atheists, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, that person who let’s their dog fertilize your lawn and not pick it up...every stinking time. Yep, love them. Love everyone. Show them that sacrificial love that is only possible through the Holy Spirit. This is that being salt and light in a dark world full of decay.

Why should we love all people with this kind of love? Look at verse 13. Paul says, **“God is at work establishing our hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus.”** Well for starters, it is the work of sanctification. That’s a big word that just means holy, or set apart for a purpose. As Christ followers, we are set apart to be refined and become more and more like Christ – at least we should be.

But I don’t want you miss something important. Paul says, **“At the coming of our Lord Jesus.”** We are preparing for His Return! Jesus is coming again. Amen. He is coming again and it could be anytime. Anytime, Christ could come back for His church. For you and me. Hallelujah! Amen. But if we truly believe this, we should be loving on people who don’t know Christ. By loving them, I of course mean actions like serving those who have needs: Preparing meals, fixing a broken fence, changing a flat tire, and so on; being there as a comfort for those who are hurting because of a job loss, a divorce, a death and so on. But we need to take it one step further if we really love others. We will share the Gospel – the Good News - with them. Jesus said, **“There is no greater love than one who lay down his life for his friends.”** Jesus did not die for Himself, but He died so others might live. If we really love all people, and we really believe that Jesus’ return is imminent, then we cannot help but tell them that Christ came, died and rose again to pay the penalty for sin. We must share the Gospel – with love and conviction. Amen.

So where do we go from here? Life is full of curveballs. We all have had dreams, and sometimes dreams die. We can become paralyzed with fear and defeat, or we can stand firm by deepening our faith, deepening our prayer life, and deepening our love.

Here’s what I’d like you to do. I want you to consider each anchor. Again, they’re **deepening your faith, deepening your prayer life, and deepening our love**. How are you doing in each area? On a scale of 1-10, today, how are you doing in your faith? On a scale of 1 – 10, are you a 3? You know your sins are covered, but you doubt God can meet your physical needs. Remember, God knows already how you are doing. He won’t be surprised. This is for you. After you know your number, identify one thing you can do this week to raise your temperature by one degree. If you’re a 3, what can you and will you do this week to get it up to a

4. Do this for each anchor. You can't improve what you don't manage, and you can't manage what you do not know.

I promise you, no matter the curveball, no matter the shattered dreams, you can stand firm. You can stand firm, but thankfully not in your own power, but in the power of Jesus Christ in you.

N: Let's turn again to Arnie Cole and Cara Whitney. I asked our listeners to take a personal assessment of their spiritual life today. So I'm going to put you on the spot and ask each one of you: As you look back on your faith life, in what areas have you grown and what was it that caused you to grow?

C: I have grown in my trust in my dependence on God. I had some trust issues I had to work out with Him, and it was in trials that most of my growth was, that made me stronger, in that I've got a complete dependence on God. Now I completely trust him. I have a lot of peace in a lot of situations, because of, but I really, really had to work through all of that. And my prayer life has gotten stronger as well.

N: How about you Arnie?

A: Yeah, I would say trust as well. That really, the ability to step out in faith, is just something that you have to have complete trust in the Lord, that He'll never leave you or forsake you. And whether it's health issues, which you really have very little control of, or even in ministry issues, oftentimes the big thing is, do you step out in faith, or do you step out in foolishness? And it's the accounting people that always say, "Oh man, that was foolish". Or, you know, the people that study the past. But really, you have to step out in faith. And that just grows. The more you trust, the more freedom you have as a Christ follower, to really have impact in other people's lives.

N: Trust is something I think we all can grow in, in our faith, but it does take little baby steps of faith to get us there. And I don't think we're ever fully there. I know being a follower of Christ for as many years as I have, I feel like I've hit a certain level in my walk with Him. And it seems like God's always got that next level of growth for me. And it often comes in the area of trust. Well, today we all have a choice to choose compromise or character. That's usually the easy road, the safest road, and I think the most popular road. So what do we need to remember, so that we take the harder road and choose character first?

C: I would say, Jesus, didn't take an opinion poll to figure out which was the most popular way towards Salvation. God is serious. It's mentioned on so many occasions. I was going to list all of them, but we don't have enough time. God is serious about our not compromising His Word with the values of the world. So period, don't do it. Follow the Word of God. I guess I care more about what God thinks about it than what people think.

A: If you look who Christ chose to follow Him, it wasn't the "in" crowd. It wasn't the super elite. It wasn't the super smart. It wasn't the mega drones. It was people who, fishermen, you

know, who just had not much education. And so I agree, it's people though, who did not compromise; they were still people, but they towed the line.

N: So as we choose character over compromise, chances are, it will come at a cost, but that cost is well worth it. And thank you to God, as you said, that He takes everyday people, everyday ordinary people like you and I, to pursue Him and to follow Him. And when we do, we leave a legacy that impacts the lives today, tomorrow, and in the years to come.