

## **“Direct Our Way to You”**

### **1 Thessalonians 3:9-13**

When I took high school youth groups backpacking in the Colorado Rockies, one of the lessons I would teach them: Do not take shortcuts. But some shortcuts simply cut the corners off a switchback, so what’s the problem?

The problem is that if you take short shortcuts, you’ll probably get in the habit of taking longer ones and then you discover you’re on the wrong trail and separated from your hiking companions – to say nothing of the environmental damage you cause by creating an erosion-prone trail straight down the mountain.

Take a walk in Metroparks and you encounter small trails branching off the main trails where people are trying to take shortcuts. Or along the sidewalks around our hospitals and other public buildings where people veer off the sidewalks and have worn a path that is more direct to save 5 seconds.

My son-in-law, Andy, works on CAD programs that lay out parking lots and sidewalks around Columbus – most recently the 1000-acre Intel site in New Albany. He tries to envision where drivers and walkers will really want to go to avoid what planners now call “desire paths”. They are unplanned small trails that usually represent “the shortest or the most easily navigated route between an origin and a destination”.

The Bible is all over the idea of paths — the good ones and the bad ones.

- My people, your leaders mislead you, and confuse the course of your paths.

—Isaiah 3:12

- Keep straight the path of your feet, and all your ways will be sure.  
—Proverbs 4:26
- Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.  
—Psalm 25:6
- Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!  
—Romans 11:33, NIV
- Her ways [wisdom] are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.  
—Proverbs 3:17
- I instruct you in the way of wisdom and lead you along straight paths  
—Proverbs 4:11, NIV
- I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice.  
—Proverb 8:20
- The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
—Isaiah 40:3, KJV

This is only a beginning! The Bible is strong about the importance of choosing — *desiring*, — the right path. There are right paths, and paths that are not so right. There are good choices, and not so good choices.

In today's reading from Paul's first letter to the church at the city of what we now call Thessaloniki (also known as Thessalonica and Saloniki — a modern city of more than a million inhabitants and the second largest city in Greece) — we get the ancient apostle's idea of what

makes for good paths. What sort of path should we desire that gives us the best chance to get to the destination we want?

Paul writes, “But Timothy has just now come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith” (v. 6). Later in the same reading, he adds, “Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith” (v. 10).

What does it mean to walk on the path of faith? It could mean that we’re comfortable when *walking by faith and not by sight*, trusting in the promises of God even when circumstances seem uncertain and the path ahead appears unclear. Hebrews 11:1 gives us more detail: “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” It’s like the Harrison Ford character in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, where Indy must cross an enormous chasm to get to the Holy Grail. “It’s a leap of faith,” he concludes before stepping into the void, and an invisible bridge only appears after he takes the plunge. Step by step, he makes it across.

Getting comfortable with that sort of sightless walking takes time. That’s why walking on the path of faith might also mean we must learn perseverance. Faith enables us to persevere in the face of trials, to find hope in the midst of despair, and to experience joy even in the midst of sorrow. By faith, Paul could write to the Corinthians, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Corinthians 4:8-9). Getting knocked down, but not knocked out, and getting up again — that takes perseverance.

Faith might also mean that we need *to walk with Someone else*. The writer of Hebrews says that while running the path of life, there is a surprising key to success: “Let us run with *perseverance* the race that is set before us, *looking to Jesus* the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame...” (Hebrews 12:1-2).

Finally, walking in the path of faith is easier *when it is done in community*. Faith is not meant to be lived in isolation, but in community with other believers. That’s why the Bible places such importance on living together in faith, answering the call to encourage, support and uplift one another, bearing each other’s burdens, sharing in each other’s joys and sorrows, and always taking the path of loving and forgiving one another as Jesus loves and forgives us.

Paul tells the Thessalonian believers that “Timothy has just now come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your ... love” (v. 6). Then he adds, “And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all” (v. 12). Clearly, the desire path of love is important to the apostle Paul. He famously devoted an entire chapter on the subject in his first letter to the Corinthian church (chapter 13). Love is patient and kind . . .

Four things immediately leap out from a close look at today’s text:

- The Lord is the source of love.
- Love can increase.
- Love can abound.
- Love is inclusive.

When walking the path of abounding love, it is helpful to remember that *the Lord is the source of love*. “May the Lord make you increase and abound in love ...” (v. 12). The prayer begins with an acknowledgment that true love originates from God. Paul is asking the Lord to actively work in the hearts of the believers, enhancing their capacity to love. This implies that the ability to love others deeply and genuinely is a *divine gift and not merely a human effort*. Frankly, this means that if we are having trouble abounding in love, it could be that we’re having a tough time abounding in the Lord.

Next, Paul desires that *this love “increase.”* To “increase” in abounding love suggests growth and development. True love is not static but flowing, dynamic, expanding and growing.

Consider this classic exchange between spouses: “Why don’t you ever tell me you love me?”

“I told you 42 years ago that I loved you and if I ever change my mind, I’ll let you know.”

This is static love. The kind about which country and country breakup songs are written.

True love is love that lasts down the road. It comes from God and is nurtured through prayer, study of the Bible, the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and a genuine desire to lay down some love for people. The Righteous Brothers may have “lost that lovin’ feeling,” but righteous believers not only hang on to it — they get better at it. They are not like the man who found the love of his life ... for the third time in two years.

Increasing in love involves the word “more”. It means becoming *more* sensitive to the needs of others, *more* willing to serve, and *more* committed to imitating Jesus than mimicking others.

Next, the Bible wants us to “abound” in love. To “abound” in love goes beyond mere growth; it speaks of *overflowing abundance*, extravagance, lavishness. The apostle Paul repeats this advice elsewhere: “And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight” (Philippians 1:9). It implies that our love should be so plentiful that it spills over like an Einstein’s mocha coffee delivered by Stan on Tuesday mornings. This kind of out-of-control love is generous, extravagant and selfless. It’s a love that doesn’t hold back, but gives freely and abundantly, just as God has given to us.

Finally, Paul wants us to walk the path of *inclusive* love: “Abound in love for one another and for all” (v. 12). This dual focus is crucial. We should have no trouble walking the path of abounding love while enjoying the support of the community of faith. But Paul makes it clear that our love should abound “for all.”

This is expansive and perhaps expensive love, but it is also what the church is all about. This love dovetails with God’s universal love for humanity and underscores the mission of the church to be a light to the world, demonstrating God’s love to all people regardless.

Okay, fine. But how?

It cannot happen unless we depend on God for strength and courage. Abounding in love can’t happen without practicing generosity. And it is more than likely that walking the desire path of abounding love cannot happen without making a conscious effort to expand your reach, to love not only those within your immediate circle but also those outside it.

Paul writes, “And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father” (v. 13).

Ask yourself, “Are you a holy person?” Most people might be embarrassed to respond with “yes.” We might fear that we’re setting ourselves up and apart from everyone. We are afraid that others will think of us as sanctimonious, prideful and arrogant.

We should not be shy about admitting that we strive to be holy. Why not? Because God is holy, and therefore we should try to be more godlike, and godly, in our personal lives.

Holiness is an attribute of God. It should also be an attribute of someone who is a disciple or follower of Jesus, the Son of God. The holiness of God means that God is absolute moral perfection. Isaiah 6:3 says, “The seraphim call out, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.’”

According to Exodus 15:11, Moses praises Yahweh, saying, “Who among the gods is like you, LORD? Who is like you — majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?” You could say that holiness is not just an attribute of God but is the essence of the nature of God. Everything about God — actions, decisions and character — is holy.

And should this not be true of us? Should not everything about us — our actions, decisions and character — be holy?

Evidently, God thought so. In the Old Testament, Israel was called to be a holy nation, set apart for God’s purposes. “You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own” (Leviticus 20:26).

The call to holiness continues in the New Testament, and not just in today’s text from 1 Thessalonians 3. The apostle Peter echoes Leviticus, when he writes, “But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy’” (1 Peter 1:15-16).

Are you now more willing to identify as a “holy” person? Or are you still afraid that being holy might mean that you’re an NFP (No-Fun Person)? A drag? Someone who’d be unwelcome at the office Christmas party?

Not to worry. Your holiness serves as a witness to the world. When believers live holy lives, they reflect God’s character and draw others to God. Jesus said in Matthew 5:16: “Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” Our holiness points others to the holiness of God. This is a desire path we all should walk.

In a world that often celebrates the bad, arrogant jerks among us, living a holy life makes believers stand out. It’s okay to be different; it’s okay to desire to walk the path of the righteous; it’s okay to take “the road not taken.” It will indeed make all the difference.

May the peace of God . . .

#769 – If You But Trust in God to Guide You