

March 6, 2016
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OH NO, NOT THAT STOMACH VIRUS!
1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

State Farm has a commercial on television that I always get a kick out of both because I find it funny and because I think it says something profound about life. In the initial scene a guy is at a pool party with a couple of buddies. He looks around at the girls in bikinis and says, "I am never getting married." A buddy says, "Never," and he responds, "Guaranteed!" In the next scene he's at a jewelry store buying a diamond engagement ring because a young woman has captured his heart and made a mockery of his no marriage guarantee. In the next scene he and his wife are on an airplane and there are a couple of kids nearby screaming like banshees. He says to his wife, "We are never having kids." She shakes her head in total agreement that the very idea is appalling. What follows is a scene in the hospital as she's in labor and he says, "Breathe." Next they are in their downtown apartment, feeding their baby and she says, "I love it here." He says, "We are never moving to the suburbs." Naturally the next scene shows them on the front lawn of their suburban house and a van goes by. He says, "We are never getting one of those." Of course then comes a scene where he is washing their van in the driveway of their suburban home. Then there is a scene where he is obviously tired, cleaning up a big mess their child has made and he wearily says to his wife as she is walking by, "We are never having another child." She answers, "I'm pregnant." In the final scene he is on the couch next to his wife, looking at the kids curled up asleep by them and he says, "I am never letting go."

We can all identify with the folly of beginning statements with the words, "I am never..." Sometimes it seems like that's a guarantee that we'll end up doing whatever we were certain we would never do. But beyond that there is a profound message in the story of that commercial. There were things the guy looked at and said, "That's so confining, I would never want that. A really great life requires freedom to do whatever you want. Who wants to have all these demands and restrictions?" And then he learns that the things he saw as constraining and possibly joy killing were the very things that brought joy to his soul. They were the things that filled his life with meaning and love.

Today we are going to think about something that falls into the "I would never" category for the majority of people. It's something they think means no fun and a life full of dull, demanding, joy-killing duty. As it turns out they could not be more wrong. This thing is much like those relationships that the guy in the commercial

thought he wanted to avoid only to find out they were the things he most wanted and needed in life. We will see this thing in 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13.

It is in large part because of a first century Jewish man named Saul, also called Paul, that we are believers in Jesus today. God used him to open the church to non-Jews, like most of us, and God also used him to first bring the good news to Europe, and from there it later came to America. The name “Paul” means “small” or “little one,” maybe a nickname he got as a baby or maybe he wasn’t very big. This possibly little guy who had a number of health problems and by his own admission wasn’t very impressive in person, was a giant in history and in God’s plan for the human race. We owe much of our spiritual heritage to him.

If Paul were alive today what would he pray for us? We can get a good idea by reading his prayers for believers that are recorded in his letters. Up to this point in this letter to the Thessalonian Christians Paul has mostly been given thanks. But in these verses we look at today we will see what he prayed for them, and by extension we can know what he would pray for us.

THAT WE WOULD BE HOLY

In verse 13 Paul prayed that God would “establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of the Lord Jesus.” The heart of that prayer is that God would work to establish believers in holiness. I want to begin by looking at that idea.

What does it mean to be holy? The idea of holiness has fallen on hard times in our society. There was a time when everyone understood holiness and believed it to be an excellent thing, but that is not true today. People want to be cool, in, sexy, smart, with it, hot, any number of adjectives, but they do not want to be holy. In fact being “holy” is commonly seen as undesirable. But our culture has bought into a lie.

To understand holiness it is helpful to think of God, the embodiment of holiness. Psalm 71:23 calls God the Holy One of Israel. Psalm 99:3 says, “Let them praise your great and awesome name; Holy is He.” Psalm 99:5 says, “Exalt the Lord our God and worship at his footstool. Holy is He.” Holiness is defined by and perfectly exemplified by the character of God.

Holiness has two aspects. The Hebrew word translated “holy” started with the idea of being separate. It meant to be set apart. The first aspect of holiness is being special, different, set apart from others. So God is holy in the sense that there is no

other being like him. Only one being existed before creation. Only one being is not caused by someone or something else. Only one being is all powerful and all knowing. That, of course, is God. God is completely set apart from all else. Psalm 86:8 says, "Among the gods there is none like you, Lord." At one time I thought there surely must not be many Rick Myatts in the world. But if you google the name you will discover there are a lot of them. But assume for the moment that I was the only one, and I was the only person that looked like me. You still could not say there is no one like me because there are lots of human beings who have the same number of arms, legs, eyes, ears, mouths, noses as I do and who are similar in height and weight. That is not true of God. There literally is no other being like him. So God is set apart, holy, because he is utterly unique. He stands apart from all else. He is the one Almighty, Creator God, and there is only one.

Then there is the second aspect of holiness, which is that God is totally pure, totally good, completely set apart from any evil. He is perfectly righteous. Job 34:12 says, "It is unthinkable that God would do wrong." Psalm 92:15 says there is "no unrighteousness in him." In Matthew 5:48 Jesus said the Father is perfect.

God is perfectly good. He never even has a momentary thought that is unkind, less than noble, impatient, or provoked by frustration, nor does he ever act in those ways. He is never even for a nanosecond given to selfishness. Every thought he has, every decision he makes and every action he takes is pure, 100% good and driven by the desire to do good to his creatures. There is never a flicker of variation from good in him.

This is what it means to be holy. A couple of weeks ago Carissa had a bout of stomach flu. It was that 24 hour thing where when we told her she wasn't going to die from it that wasn't good news. She felt totally wretched. Toby had an even more severe case a couple of months ago. We looked that up on the Internet and were dismayed to read that this was likely a norovirus, which is caused by, I can hardly bear to say it, ingesting food that has somehow come into contact with some fecal matter. That almost makes me sick to even hear it. How holy do you want your food to be? How set apart do you want it to be from fecal matter? For me and my house, we want it to be totally holy, completely set apart from even a nano hint of anything resembling fecal matter. I am so not okay with even a little touch of anything like that. As pure as you want your food to be, as free of any kind of contaminant, God is even more pure and holy than that from any hint of evil. That is crucial, for if there were any evil in him we could never really be safe with him nor could we trust him.

Now we have an idea of what holiness actually is, having seen it exemplified by God, we must bring this back around to us. Paul prayed that believers would be established blameless in holiness. God commands this in his word repeatedly. In Leviticus 19:2 he says, “Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: ‘Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.’” Yes, but that was Israel in the Old Testament, not us. 1 Peter 1:15-16, written to followers of Jesus, says, “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.’”

Clearly we cannot be holy exactly as God is holy. We cannot be all-powerful, we cannot exist from eternity past, we cannot be all-knowing, nor can we be absolutely pure and good as he is. But we are called to imitate him, to be an image, a small picture of his holiness. 1 Peter 2:9 says we are a holy nation and a royal priesthood. We are all holy, set apart, to be priests of God, meaning we are to represent God to people. Imagine someone who represents a company that provides a physical fitness program of diet and exercise. What if this person is 50 pounds overweight, couldn't run a mile even if given all day to do it, feasts on doughnuts every day and has been sternly warned by his doctor that he is a coronary event waiting to occur? Would you be anxious to engage the services of his company? I doubt it. Neither does a holy God desire to have unholy people representing him and giving everyone the wrong idea of who he is.

In one of the senses of holiness if you are a believer in Jesus you are already holy. That's because you have been set apart. You have received a special calling. You're not like everyone else in the world. You are God's child. You are free from fear of condemnation, you are forgiven and loved forever. You are part of his kingdom and will be for eternity. You are also called to serve God, to declare the praise of the one who has set you free. You have been given the high privilege of representing God to the desperate world around you. All of that has already happened. You are set apart for a special purpose.

Here's something you can check if you don't believe I'm telling the truth. Quarterbacks in the National Football League are holy. They are set apart. In practices Charger players either wear a blue jersey or a white one, depending on whether they are on defense or offense. Except for quarterbacks. They wear a red jersey. They are set apart, separate from everyone else. That red jersey says, “If you hit this man, if you hurt him, you will be looking for a new job tomorrow.” You will never see a quarterback playing on special teams, covering punts or returning kickoffs. They are set apart because they have a special, critically important role on the team. They are holy. As a believer in Jesus, you are holy.

You wear a red jersey and you are not supposed to be caught up in doing the routine things others might do, you have a special purpose, and that is to display the glory of our holy God accurately to the world.

You may or may not be living according to that calling, but you have been set apart for it nevertheless. That's a done deal. Imagine that a guy gets elected President of the United States. But quickly he finds himself feeling overwhelmed by that weighty position. He can't handle it, so he moves out of the White House and into a crummy studio apartment down in Mission Beach. He spends his days panhandling to get money and lives on pizza, and when he's not panhandling he surfs or plays video games. Is he still the President? Until he's impeached, yes. He may not be living like he is, but he still has that position, whether he likes it or not. We may not be living like we are holy, set apart as priests of our holy God, but we have been set apart for that role even if we choose to abdicate it. Amazingly God doesn't impeach us when we compromise that great calling.

But remember that other aspect of holiness. We are to be, like God, separate from evil. We are to be righteous, truly good. Colossians 3:12 says, "as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience."

It is important to observe what the Bible says a holy person is really like. Romans 12:1 says, "offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God." What does that entail? Verse 2 says, "do not conform to the pattern of this world." So being holy is giving ourselves to God and not being conformed to the world around us. Too often Christians take this to mean holiness is non-conformity. The problem with non-conformity is that it almost always turns into something external. If the world is wearing long hair then it is wearing short hair, that sort of thing. The world actually has lots of non-conformists. They do things like wear ripped jeans and T-shirts, conforming to all the other non-conformists.

That's not the holiness that God is looking for. Romans 12:2 goes on to talk about being transformed, truly changed from the inside out. It is about things much deeper than how we look or dress. We all know that Jesus ran into this problem with the Pharisees. They thought holiness consisted of things like being circumcised, not eating pork, keeping the Sabbath rules and performing ceremonial hand washing before eating. In Matthew 15:18-20 Jesus said it's not about what we eat. He said, "But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder,

adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them.”

We saw this in Colossians 3:12 where holiness was a matter of compassion, kindness, gentleness, humility and patience. This is what God wants us changed into, people whose hearts are truly good and full of caring, compassion and kindness for others.

This raises the question of why we should care about holiness. Why should we want to be holy? You can start with the fact that you have been given this incredible high and noble calling. When you fail to live by it you are losing a sense of how special you are. Who wouldn't want to be the quarterback, the most important person on the team? Walking away from that calling is losing a sense of your own worth and importance.

There is more though. Psalm 96:9 says, “worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness.” There is some debate about the correct translation of that verse. Some versions have it, “worship the Lord with the splendor of holiness.” I don't want to debate which is right today, I want us to note what that says about holiness. Either way it is translated the verse says that holiness has splendor. How many things in your life would you describe as having splendor? The King James spoke of the “beauty” of holiness in that verse. There is something beautiful about holiness.

The year my dad died we decided that if possible it would be a good idea to not have Thanksgiving at home the way we normally would celebrate it. We knew that would just be so very painful for all of us. We came up with a plan to go to Hawaii and to have Thanksgiving there. Just being in a different place, a beautiful place somehow made it a little easier to deal with. As part of that trip we stayed several days in a beautiful hotel in Honolulu. The hotel was decorated for Christmas. One of my most vivid memories of that trip was those Christmas decorations. It was spectacular, some of the most glorious and beautiful decorations I've ever seen. It had splendor. Splendor is striking, it is memorable, it is emotionally powerful. That's what Psalm 96:9 tells us about holiness. It has splendor. It is striking, it is beautiful, so magnificent that it powerfully touches the hearts of those who see it.

Who among us doesn't want to have splendor? Who doesn't want to be beautiful? The religious, external distortion of holiness is at best unappealing, at worst repulsive. But the real thing is magnificent and powerfully appealing. When we see real holiness we admire it and say, “Yes, that is what I want!” When we encounter

a life of real holiness it makes every other kind of life look shallow, empty and unappealing.

I experienced this a couple of weeks ago. Monty Williams is the former coach of the New Orleans Pelicans of the NBA and now an assistant coach of the Oklahoma Thunder. Just a few weeks ago his wife, whom he loved with all his heart, the mother of their 4 kids, was killed in a terrible auto accident. A woman was driving 90 miles per hour in a 40 mile per hour zone, clipped a car and veered into the oncoming lane, hitting Mrs. Williams' vehicle head on. I saw the video of this man speaking at his wife's funeral. He talked about the terrible pain of that loss. But he said that God loves us enough to send his Son to this world to die in order to save us. He loves us that much. He said in effect because he knows God loves us that much that this, too, will work out. He said in the end it will be all right. He knows that his wife is separated from us, but not lost. He knows exactly where she is, in the presence of her beloved Lord. He said that we all need to have compassion on the family of the woman who caused the horrific accident and grant them forgiveness, knowing that they, too are grieving. He exhibited astounding authenticity, grace, love, kindness, humility and strength. He displayed holiness.

I also witnessed the response of several personalities that I have watched many times on ESPN. These are people who tend to be a little brash, often critical, often irreverent. They were humbled, almost subdued and admitted that they could not imagine exhibiting the grace and strength that Mr. Williams showed. They expressed profound admiration for him, and said they hoped they could have a fraction of what he displayed. They saw holiness, and it had splendor. All of us wish that we could possess that splendor. We want holiness.

This makes total sense. You may notice the verbal similarity between the words "holiness" and "wholeness." The word "holiness" derives from the old English word "halig." It meant "whole" or "health." It is reflected in our current word "hale" as in "hale and hearty," meaning "very healthy." Holiness is health, wholeness of soul. A lack of holiness is actually sickness. Go back to that stomach virus thing. Evil or sin, as the Bible calls it, is like fecal matter. What is it going to do to your soul? It makes it violently ill. Every little bit of evil or sin in our lives may seem appealing, may give a little rush of momentary pleasure at times, but it will in the end always produce loss, hurt, anger, frustration, restlessness, emptiness, damage to ourselves and others and bitterness.

Every little bit of evil that even touches your soul will make you sick. The more evil you allow the sicker it will make your soul. We think we want coolness, not

holiness. Is hopelessness cool? Is despair cool? Is bitterness cool? Is using other people for selfish ends cool? Are destroyed relationships cool? Is damaging other people cool? Is emptiness and frustration cool? This is what evil produces. What you want is holiness, health of soul, which produces love, joy and peace.

THAT WE WOULD LOVE

There was something else that Paul prayed that actually is connected to the holiness we've just talked about. In verse 12 he prayed that the Lord would "make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all." So, to no one's surprise, what he longed for was that they, and ultimately we also, would abound in love.

Unfortunately the NIV does a poor job of translating the transition from verse 12 to verse 13. It puts a period at the end of verse 12 and then phrases verse 13 as though it is a new sentence and a new topic. It sounds like Paul prays that God will cause their love to increase and also that they would be holy. But that misses what the original Greek text actually says. The English Standard Version has a much better translation. After praying in verse 12 that they would abound in love he says in verse 13, "so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness." So that. That tells us how God establishes us in holiness. It is by us abounding in love for others!

The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible says, "the supreme manifestation of holiness is love." That is definitely true, but this passage suggests something even beyond that. It says that truly loving is not just the manifestation of holiness, but the very definition of it. One actually becomes holy by loving others. If you love someone you will seek that person's good. You will never do anything that would hurt that person and you would do everything in your power to bring about their good.

Would you steal, cheat, lust after another person, would you gossip about that person, would you use them for your own ends, if you love that person? Absolutely not. That's why Romans 13:8 tells us "whoever loves others has fulfilled the law." Verse 10 repeats that idea when it says, "Love is the fulfillment of the law." Real love is holiness. The path to real holiness is through love. We got a sense of that when we read Colossians 3:12. True holiness had to do with things like compassion, kindness, gentleness and patience. Those are the kinds of things that real love will always produce.

What is love? It isn't an emotion, a feeling. Even a little thought tells us this. Imagine a young mom whose child is sick, and who has caught the child's illness.

Her poor child is cranky, fussy, just being a pill to deal with, and she herself is exhausted, feeling terrible, at her wit's end. What does she feel toward her child at that moment? Most likely it isn't a welling up of great, positive emotion. Yet she chooses to patiently care for her child, to nurse the infant through its illness and to communicate care despite what she may feel. At that moment she is loving that child, and that love has little to do with emotion.

At its root love is an unwavering desire for and commitment to the good of the one loved. It's nice when that desire and commitment are accompanied by feelings of affection and love, but those are not the substance of love. When they were hammering nails through his arms to put him on a cross I doubt if Jesus was feeling an upwelling of affection for those who put him there. But he went there because he loved them. He chose to seek their good even when they were more hateful to him than we can ever understand. That was real love.

To the degree that love fills our hearts we will become holy. If we are discounting our own interests, desires and feelings and instead seeking good for others, what will we be like? We will be full of compassion for them. We will be kind to them. We will be patient with them. We will give them the grace that God has given us. We will act with all the resources we have to bring good to their lives. We will do anything we can to avoid harming them. We will make an effort to serve them. We will want to do anything we can to bless them. Isn't that what holiness is really about?

I love the words that Paul uses to pray for them in verse 12. He wants them to increase and abound in love. The word "increase" means to multiply. In 4:9-10 he said he didn't need to write them about love because they obviously loved greatly already, but then he went on to say, "do so more and more." Literally he told them to abound more in love. The New American Standard translated that "excel still more."

Maybe you have experienced a similar disappointment to one I have dealt with in my life. I've never been a star at anything. I am fairly intelligent, but I've never been exceptionally smart. I loved sports all my life and have always felt like most of the time I'm not totally inept at them, but I've been the farthest thing from a star at any of them. The height of my athletic prowess I guess was playing a little baseball at the college level for a couple of years. But I can sum my success up there by one incident. My final game came in my sophomore year. It was against UC Riverside and I had a great game. I got 3 hits and drove in 5 runs in a game we won 8-3. My RBI's were the margin of victory for us. But in one of those at bats I

came up with the bases loaded and hit a double to right center. When the inning ended I headed to my position at first base. Our coach, who really liked me, was standing just outside our dugout by first base. As I neared him with a grin on his face he shook his head and said, "Myatt, you have got to be the luckiest hitter I have ever seen." On my best days I wasn't good, I was lucky.

I feel like that theme runs throughout my life. I liked music and played the guitar when I was young. And I can carry a tune when I sing. But I was never very good at guitar and generally people would prefer that I carry my tune somewhere else. I can write reasonably well and have even written some novels. Not everybody can say that. But no one is mistaking me for a best-selling author. Do you see the theme? In every endeavor in life I range from being utterly inept to being pretty good, but nothing special.

God challenges me to be a star, to excel at something. What he wants me to excel at is loving other people. This is possible for even me, and it is possible for you, too. We can be the best lovers of others in the entire world. This will mean we have to give up taking care of self as our motive in all we do. Our motive must become to love people like Jesus loves us. This calls us to lavish them with grace and mercy. People can be hard to love sometimes. I remember a time when I was astounded by how inconsiderate people can be. Laurie and I were on vacation. We were sitting out in an area at the hotel we were staying at that had a large lawn around the pool area. All of this was right next to the beach and the spectacular ocean beyond. The setting was gorgeous. This particular day I was just dumbfounded when a woman, another vacationer, stopped not far from us and dumped the contents of her purse out on the grass. She had apparently decided she needed to clean out her purse. She proceeded to pick through all the items and retrieve the ones she needed like her keys, wallet, lipstick and so on. She put all those items back in her purse and walked away, leaving a pile of trash on the grass. She did this 5 feet from a trash receptacle! I was astounded. In this beautiful, pristine setting, she just dumped trash on the ground when it would have required almost no extra effort to put it in the garbage can. She seemed utterly uninterested in doing anything but what was most convenient for her regardless of how it might affect other people. So what if it made the place look kind of trashy? So what if someone else had to clean up after her?

Here's the big problem for me. Jesus loves that woman. He loves her as much as he loves me. And he tells me to not just love her, but to excel in loving her, to be a star at loving other human beings who are just as self-absorbed and inconsiderate as that woman.

God wants us to be stars at going above and beyond the call of duty to care for people, to serve them, to give to them, to bless them, to affirm them, to value them, to be kind to them, to be patient with them, to forgive them, for these are all the things that love does.

In *The Fellowship of the Ring* you might recall that the little hobbit, Frodo, is given the ominous, difficult and potentially suicidal task of going into Mordor, the kingdom of darkness, and destroying the one ring of power in order to protect the whole world from the horror of evil. He is given companions to help him on his way and to protect him as much as possible. At one point when his quest is very much in doubt the elfin queen, Galadriel, described by Tolkien as “the mightiest and fairest of all the elves,” says to Frodo, “Your quest stands upon the edge of a knife. Stray but a little and it will fail, to the ruin of all. Yet hope remains while the Company is true.” The church is not mainly an organization. It is not a purveyor of programs. At its heart it is the fellowship of the cross, a group of people ruled by love and grace, a community of people that stick with each other no matter what may come and always serve and love each other. This is what we are to excel at.

There is no deep insight here or some new secret. The point today is to inspire you with the challenge to be holy like our God is holy. It is to be as absolutely good as he is, for such goodness is beautiful and will stand out in stark glory in all of the ugliness and pollution of this world. It is to inspire you to be like a scene of pristine pure beauty in a world that has been fouled and contaminated.

The practical way for us to do that is to become stars at loving others. Make it your goal to be a lover of other people like the world has never seen before, beginning with the people in your own house, then extending to every person you encounter.