

HOLY WAITING

Living in Holiness as We Await the Return of Christ

A Holy Community of Love

Key Idea:

God empowers His people to overflow with love — and this love, far from opposing holiness, is precisely what produces it, establishing the church as a holy community of love as it looks forward to the return of Jesus.

Key Text:

Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, ¹² and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, ¹³so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. (1 Thessalonians 3:11–13 ESV)

Key Points:

- **This passage is the great hinge of 1 Thessalonians, and Paul's prayer reveals the heart of what is to come.** Paul's sudden shift into prayer (the optative mood in Greek) marks a turning point in the letter. Everything before this has been largely retrospective — Paul's account of their shared history, his longing to return, and his relief at Timothy's good report. Now, in praying for their love and holiness, he introduces the two major themes that will dominate the rest of the letter: holy conduct and the return of Christ. What Paul prays here, he will spend chapters 4–5 unpacking. Like the Roman god Janus standing at a threshold facing both ways, this passage looks back and forward at once.
- **God's people are called to a love that is super-abundant, ever-increasing, and directed both inward and outward.** Paul does not pray for a modest or minimal love — he prays that the Thessalonians would “increase and abound” in it, language that evokes overflowing excess. This love has two directions: “for one another” (within the covenant community) and “for all” (those outside, including unbelievers). Paul prays the same thing for the Philippians (Phil. 1:9). The need for believers to grow in love is constant, universal, and never fully arrived at in this life — which is why Paul expresses it as a prayer rather than a command. It is God who makes love grow.
- **Love within the community is a new-covenant command that pushes against every individualistic, offense-holding instinct of our culture.** Jesus gave His disciples a new

command: love one another as He loved them (John 13:34–35). This love is the church’s primary witness to the world. But it is costly — it requires patience, grace, forgiveness, and a commitment to stay in relationship through difficulty rather than simply moving on. Our culture of individualism and accumulated offense is the precise enemy of the community Paul envisions. A community of overflowing love will remain patient and forgiving toward one another rather than separating over relational offenses. The New Testament knows no Christianity that is not communal, long-suffering, and relationally committed over the long haul.

- **Love and holiness are not opposites — genuine love is precisely what produces genuine holiness.** Our culture assumes love is incompatible with moral standards, and that holiness is cold, rigid, and unloving. Paul’s prayer exposes both assumptions as false. The “so that” of v. 13 is a purpose clause: overflowing love is the means by which God establishes hearts blameless in holiness. God is simultaneously and equally Love and Holy — these are not competing attributes but complementary expressions of His one character. A community that truly loves will grow in holiness. A community that claims holiness without love is self-deceived, and a community that claims love while making peace with sin has mistaken sentiment for the real thing.
- **The power for holiness comes from God, and its motivation is the coming of Christ.** Because holiness is ultimately God’s work and not ours, Paul expresses his longing for it as a prayer. Justification gives us the status of being God’s holy people; sanctification is the lifelong growth in actual holy conduct, fueled by God’s power as He strengthens us to desire holiness and reject sin. The motivation Paul sets before the community is eschatological: to be found “blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus.” Biblical eschatology does not promote speculation about dates and events — it produces holiness in present lives. This single verse names the two great themes of the entire letter: holiness and the return of Christ, which together define what it means to be a people of holy waiting.

Discussion Questions:

- Bret introduced the Roman god Janus — the god of transitions and doorways, who faced both ways at once — as an image for this passage as the great “hinge” of 1 Thessalonians. Looking back at chapters 1–3, what has Paul been focused on? What does his sudden shift into prayer in v. 11 signal about where the letter is going?
- Paul — a devout Jewish monotheist — addresses his prayer to “our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus” in the same breath. What does that reveal about how Paul understood the identity of Jesus? How does praying to Jesus shape or challenge your own practice of prayer?
- Bret mentioned the practice of praying Scripture — using biblical prayers as the pattern and content of our own. Do you have a practice of praying through Scripture? How might adopting Paul’s prayer in vv. 12–13 as a regular personal prayer change the way you relate to your church community?

- Paul does not pray for a little love — he prays that the Thessalonians would “increase and abound” in it, an overflowing excess. How does that standard challenge the way you think about love in your relationships at BRCC? Where do you find yourself settling for less than this kind of love?
- The teaching noted our culture’s individualism and tendency to accumulate offenses as the great enemies of the community Paul envisions. Have you ever been tempted to leave a church community rather than work through relational difficulty? What does it cost to stay? What does the New Testament’s vision of communal life ask of us?
- Paul prays for love “for one another and for all” — both inside the community and toward those outside it, including those who are hostile to the faith. Where do you find it hardest to extend this kind of love? What would it look like in practice this week?
- Our culture tends to pit love and holiness against each other — as if genuine love means abandoning moral standards, or as if holiness means emotional coldness. Where do you see that assumption operating? How does the “so that” of v. 13 challenge the idea that love and holiness are opposites?
- Scripture distinguishes between justification (the status of holiness we have in Christ) and sanctification (the ongoing growth in actual holy conduct). How do you experience that distinction in your own life? In what areas are you currently sensing God’s call to grow in holiness?
- In “Applying the Word” Bret posed two diagnostic questions: “Am I helping to build a loving community at BRCC?” and “Am I personally growing in holiness, or have I made peace with sin?” Take a moment to sit honestly with both. Which is harder to answer? What would a faithful next step look like in each area?
- How does the Lord’s Table show the unity of holiness and love? How can the Table help undermine our cultures false opposition of love and holiness?

For Further Study:

- For Paul’s parallel prayer for overflowing love, read Philippians 1:9–11 alongside 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13 and note the identical structure: love → growth in holiness → the Day of Christ.
- For Jesus’ new commandment and its connection to the church’s witness, read John 13:31–35 alongside John 17:20–23, where Jesus prays that the unity and love of His people would cause the world to believe.
- For the warning that holiness is not optional, read Hebrews 12:14 and explore teachings on [holiness](#) and [love](#) at brcc.church.
- Watch this week’s episode of [After Hours](#) for further discussion of subtle ways the New Testament reveals the Deity of Christ, especially through allusions to Old Testament texts.
- Visit the church website to explore teachings organized by [series](#), by [Scripture](#), or by [topic](#) for deeper study of [holiness](#); [love](#); [community](#); [prayer](#); and [eschatology](#).