

P.S.

The cord of three

PAUL BEGINS his First Letter to the Thessalonians in warm and engaging style, thanking God for the spiritual qualities the brethren have shown at the start of their new lives in Christ. After his opening greetings he writes the following: “We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers; remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father; knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God” (1:2-4).

Looking at this passage recently, I was struck by the threefold list of Christlike attributes that Paul remembers the Thessalonian brethren having shown:

- work of faith
- labour of love
- patience of hope.

What we have here is a second example of the threefold cord of faith, hope and love known from 1 Corinthians 13. We know that love is the most important, but all three are critical—non-negotiable elements of a Christlike character.

But it was the particular juxtaposition of terms in the Thessalonians list that intrigued me. Why “work of faith”? Why “labour of love”? Would these be combinations of terms that one would normally have expected to find? I suspected not, and felt that each one was worth exploring in greater detail.

Because of the discussion in James and Romans it is natural to think of faith and works as potential rivals, in need of reconciliation. And yet they must be intimate partners. They must, in fact, come together as a unity: there must be a “work of faith”. Faith is a work, in other words. And work is faith (or it would be meaningless). The Lord Jesus himself made that point when asked, “What shall we do, that we might work the works of God?”, responding in the following paradoxical way: “This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom He hath sent” (Jno. 6:28,29). Paul picks up the same paradox in Thessalonians. Faith (=belief) is a work. It has physical reality in that sense. It *is* something, and it *becomes* something. It gets things done.

Paul’s next phrase, “labour of love”, is a similarly interesting pairing. Surely love doesn’t fit with labour? Labour is all reality and hard work. Love is warm and fuzzy, perhaps, or grand and idealistic. People die for love, not for labour. And yet, as anyone who has been in a relationship for any length of time well

knows, for love to grow you have to work at it. This is just how it is in marriage, and it is how it is in any relationship that is to be close and significant, and is to survive trials, circumstances, and anything beyond mere passing acquaintance.

Furthermore, labour can be motivated by love, just as works ought to be motivated by faith. We labour in His vineyards and we work at discipleship because we love Him and because we love the brethren. Labour and love do and must indeed come together in discipleship, just as works must come with faith in order to be alive.

So to Paul’s final juxtaposition: “steadfastness of hope”. Or so it is in the ESV; the AV has “patience of hope”. Both are justifiable translations, and each is worth considering. Hopes, like dreams, can be airy-fairy, not realistic. I may hope to become a great drummer, but I probably never shall. People may hope for world peace, but without an understanding of Christ’s future Kingdom they can never really hope to attain their wish. It is a mere pipe dream.

In contrast, the sort of hope that we should have is one which is concrete, grounded, sure and steadfast. It stands in complete contrast to the ephemeral things of our lives in the world, which seem so real. Though they are physical and tangible realities (unlike hope), they are things which are passing away, and in fact are of much less enduring substance. The one true hope does not change or morph. It is to be no less real today than it was a year ago or twenty years ago, and no less influential on our lives. It is to be a reality, something that makes a difference, and is a tangible feature or cornerstone of the way our lives are constructed.

And we have to maintain this. We have to continue, refusing to become frustrated or dismayed. We need patience of hope, a hope which will survive for the long-run, remaining strong and unchanged until our Lord returns.

Put all three of these together, and we have a nice model of the attributes we should develop as our spiritual ‘core’, a three-fold cord which our Thessalonian brethren, though they had not been in the Truth for very long, had already understood to be critical: belief that leads to action (“work of faith”); real effort to grow in love and to do things that are motivated by it (“labour of love”); and persistence (“patience of hope”) to maintain our hope firm to the end.

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