

## "The Love Pill"

### 1 Thessalonians 3: 6-13

6 But now Timothy has just returned, bringing us good news about your faith and love. He reports that you always remember our visit with joy and that you want to see us as much as we want to see you. 7 So we have been greatly encouraged in the midst of our troubles and suffering, dear brothers and sisters, because you have remained strong in your faith. 8 It gives us new life to know that you are standing firm in the Lord.

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.

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

Seems like there's a pill for everything these days, if you believe all the drug commercials on TV featuring smiling people who've benefited from better living through chemistry anyway. (Read the next fast like TV announcer)

But then, of course, ...side effects may occur, such as diarrhea, dry heaves, shingles and scurvy, temporary or permanent blindness and convulsions leading to a coma. Rarely, but with prolonged use, other side effects may appear such as complete loss of bladder control, loss of feeling at the extremities and festering boils. Other than that, all good.

The commercials encourage people to "Ask your doctor about ...," as if your doctor doesn't have enough trouble getting you to exercise, eat well and take the pills she's already given you that actually keep you alive.

Some of these pills are linked to erotic "love." Viewers see a couple on the outer edge of middle age sitting in matching bathtubs while staring at the ocean. With pharmaceutical assistance, romance is in the air. These "love pills" may be the ultimate happy pills for some who want to be "ready when the time is right," but there is no guarantee that they will actually enhance your relationships, or make you a better person. But! Big news! *A new breakthrough in research has produced a love drug that just might make you a more compassionate, more loving and more empathic person than you are now.*

It's a long way from being on the market, but it's on the way. Scientists have discovered that the use of a drug that prolongs the effects of dopamine (the chemical that enhances reward or satisfaction) on the brain can make a person more compassionate and predisposed to equalize differences between people in social interactions.

In a study at the University of California at Berkeley and the University of

California at San Francisco, 35 men and women visited a lab two times. Each time, they were given a random dose of either the dopamine-sustaining drug or a placebo. Then the researchers gave each person some money to divide between themselves and a stranger. The results showed that those who had taken the actual drug *were more likely to share the money equally with a stranger* than those who had the placebo. Scientists believe that their findings could eventually lead to more equitable social interactions among people by altering the chemicals in their brains -- which sounds a bit like something a James Bond villain would attempt on a large scale. [NOTE 1]

But really, do we need yet another pill, and, especially, one that makes us become what God created us to be in the first place? As Paul tells the Thessalonian church, "You don't need anyone to write to you [or write you a prescription], for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another" (4:9). In fact, in this week's text, Paul prays for the church: "And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you" (v. 12). Love and compassion, it seems, are enhanced **best** by a relationship with God.

How many of you have seen the movie *The Shack* Or read the book by the same title written by William Paul Young which tells the story of Mack Philips whose young daughter is abducted during a family vacation. Evidence indicates that she was murdered in an abandoned shack.

Four years later, Mack gets a mysterious note inviting him to the very shack where the crime was apparently committed. The note purports to be from God. In his visit to the shack, he meets God in the form of a wise woman. At one point, Mack questions God about the trinity, and God speaks about the need for being three persons yet entirely one. In explaining this to Mack, God says, "All love and relationship is possible for you only because it already exists within Me, within God, myself. Love is not the limitation; ... I *am* love."

Over several conversations Mack picks up a phrase used extensively by God, "You seem to be especially fond of a lot of people. Are there any people who you are not especially fond of?" She (God) lifts her eyes as if running down a list of every created being then says, "Nope, I haven't been able to find any. Guess that's jes' the way I is." (Makes you recall 1 John where John tells us "God IS love.")

Paul seems to be writing that he is especially fond of the people of Thessalonica because they are of him: "And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you" (1 Thessalonians 3:12). --

Thanks to Rev. Linda C. Rahe, retired ELCA clergy, Holland, Ohio, for sharing this.

Paul offers us here in 1 Thessalonians a formula for a kind of Christian kindness pill that requires no water to take other than the water of baptism. It has no debilitating side effects. It's the kind of love and compassion that's unleashed when people love each other in such a way that it cannot help but make us treat strangers as equals, and give love and resources to them equitably as well.

The Christian life is about a relationship with God that transforms us into more compassionate beings. The God of love and justice is the God of relationship and

transformation. ... The Christian life is not about believing or doing what we need to believe or do so that we can be saved. Rather, it's about seeing what is already true -- that God loves us already -- and then beginning to live in this relationship. It is about becoming conscious of and intentional about, a deepening relationship with God. --Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity* (Zondervan, 2009), 76-77.

The Thessalonian church had been ill-treated by the surrounding culture, just as Paul himself had been mistreated. Paul had come there after preaching in Philippi where he had been beaten and thrown in prison until revealing his Roman citizenship (Acts 16 and 17), and now the fledgling church in Thessalonica was experiencing its own trials on behalf of the gospel.

After his departure, Paul was clearly worried that persecution might cause a hemorrhaging of the struggling church but, miraculously, Timothy had just been there on a visit, and he returned to Paul with the "good news of [their] faith and love" (v. 6). Despite the apparent dis-ease of their situation, they had become inoculated by love for God and for others and had been able to "stand firm in the Lord" (v. 8). **[NOTE 2]**

*So, what was the chemical makeup of that kind of love and compassion for one another and even for those who persecuted them? The ingredients are Encouragement, Thanksgiving and Prayer. I have talked to you in previous sermons a fair amount about Thanksgiving and Prayer. So I want to spend a little extra time on encouragement this time. A blogger named Lisa Bartelt wrote this about being an encourager and I like it: Here are five steps to become an encourager, even if you don't think of yourself as one:*

**Assume everyone needs encouragement.** ... Turns out, even people who seem like they're confident and living out God's calling need encouragement too! Everyone needs encouragement in some way or another. If you know even one person, you know someone who needs encouragement.

**Notice people.** I know, it sounds a little creepy, but it's basically how I spend my life. I'm watching people all the time, and people will tell you a lot without ever saying a word. Chances are if you start looking around, you'll find someone who needs encouragement. ... Start looking.

**Do one easy thing now.** Texts and Facebook messages are easy for me. I can send off an encouragement text or Facebook post in a matter of seconds. Sometimes, that's all the time I have. ... **Do one hard thing later.** Writing letters and notes to people is harder because it takes more time and costs a stamp and then I have to walk it out to the mailbox and plan ahead if it's for a birthday (I'm terrible at this). Talking to people in person -- even harder. But I don't have the address for everyone in the world, nor do I always know the name of the person I'm encouraging (although I'm trying more and more to learn names, especially of those people who serve others in some way). So, maybe I write a note once a week to someone just because (we all love mail, right?). Or maybe I get over my introverted nature and tell the woman cleaning the play area at Chick-fil-A that I appreciate her work. Or maybe I do like my friend Carol and hand out restaurant gift cards to the garbage collectors at Christmas because Lord knows that is a job we underappreciate but couldn't live without.

**Equip yourself.** I'm much more likely to encourage if I feel prepared. I have an awesome stash of cards and postcards right now, and I can't wait to send them! But you don't have to be equipped with *stuff*. Equip yourself with *words*. Practice saying "Thank you" or "I appreciate you" or "Gosh, this job might seem lame, but you are doing good work!" Pack a little extra tip money the next time you go out to eat. Listen to other people encourage each other and learn from them. It's not hard, but it does take work sometimes.

Repeat the steps as necessary. I'm rediscovering that the more I encourage the more I want to encourage. And each little step in the direction of encouragement makes my burdens feel a little lighter. --Excerpted from "5 on Friday: Steps to Become an Encourager," *Living Echoes*, a blog by blogger Lisa Bartelt, [lmbartelt.wordpress.com/2014/05/23/5-on-friday-steps-to-become-an-encourager](http://lmbartelt.wordpress.com/2014/05/23/5-on-friday-steps-to-become-an-encourager), May 23, 2014. Retrieved July 3, 2015.

*Encouragement* (v. 7). It's clear from the text that Paul, Timothy and others had been giving constant encouragement to the Thessalonians, not only encouraging them to stand firm in faith and mission, but also to persist in love no matter what. "You became imitators of us and of the Lord," writes Paul, "for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers ..." (1:6-7).

The key to cultivating the kind of love that withstands the virus of hatred is to imitate someone who is demonstrating that love authentically and compassionately to all; someone who encourages you by word and example. Paul spent time with the Thessalonians, sent others to check on and encourage them, and then wrote to them again with thanksgiving for the example they were now setting for others, both friends and enemies.

In order to have the love of God flow naturally out of us, we first need someone to show us what it looks like and encourage our growth. Who might you imitate in their compassionate love for others, and for whom might you model that kind of love in return? Encouragement via imitation is a key to maintaining healthy disciples of Jesus Christ.

*Thanksgiving* (v. 9). Thanksgiving is one of the key ingredients we need every day in order to become people of love and compassion. Paul thanks the Thessalonians "for all the joy we feel before our God because of you" (v. 9). The discipline of giving thanks to God, and giving thanks to and for others, leads us to see them differently. We are more likely to treat someone with love and compassion if we know how much love and compassion we have received, just like we're more likely to be forgiving if we know how much we have been forgiven. Think of it as "thanksgiving therapy" that strengthens our ability to see others as God sees us.

*Prayer* (v. 10). Paul and his companions prayed "night and day" for the Thessalonian church, and, not just casually but "earnestly" (v. 10). No doubt they were praying earnestly for Paul, for Timothy and the rest. Prayer is an essential ingredient for the life of love and compassion because it brings us before God on behalf of someone else. We ask God to act -- to strengthen, to encourage, to heal -- and then we go out and

work for what we pray for. We pray that God will "restore whatever is lacking" in the faith and wholeness of others, even our enemies, and, when we do so, we cannot help but be more disposed in compassion toward them. We pray that God might "strengthen [their] hearts in holiness" so that they may be "blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints" (v. 13). [NOTE 3]

If you take all of these ingredients and combine them together, you have chemistry that is much stronger than anything a scientist can manufacture with a mortar and pestle. In fact, some studies have shown that there's a direct connection between prayer (which includes thanksgiving and even encouragement as we pray for others) and the release of more dopamine in the brain that stimulates feelings of reward, satisfaction and compassion. (See "This Is Your Brain on Prayer," *Homiletics*, September 27, 2015, 40.) How many of you remember the TV ad "This is your brain and it shows raw eggs and then you see the eggs, burned and black and the announcer says, "This is your brain on drugs!" There is actual science that shows a direct connection between prayer and a release of dopamine. I got that from an article titled, "This is Your Brain on Prayer."

When you read 1 Thessalonians you *do* get the idea that Paul is having a dopamine rush in thinking and praying about the Thessalonians. His love for them overflows in the letter.

*Note 4*

What would happen if we devoted ourselves to that kind of encouragement, thanksgiving and prayer for the people we encounter every day, even those who may be hostile to us? After all, when Jesus told us to love our enemies, he also told us that this is one of the ultimate demonstrations of perfect love (Matthew 5:48).

Science will keep trying to find ways to enhance our lives through better chemistry, but the reality is that some things just don't need a quick fix. Rather, they simply require some discipline and encouragement.

And the side effects are awesome!

Let's Pray ... AMEN

**Sermon Notes for “The Love Pill” based on 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13**  
**Given at Doster Community Church September 13, 2026**

1. Love and compassion, it seems, are enhanced BEST by a relationship with God! (1Thessalonians 4:9, 3:12)
2. The ingredients of the kind of love and compassion for one another that Paul is talking about include:
  - a. Encouragement (verse 7) Paul and Timothy had given them constant encouragement to stand firm in faith and mission but also to persist in live no matter what! Be “imitate-able” in love!
  - b. Thanksgiving (verse 9) When you wake up in the morning count your blessings and give thanks! There is always something you can thank God for!
  - c. Prayer (verse 10) Our example is praying night and day, earnestly. Prayer is essential for a life of love and compassion.
3. If you put together encouragement, thanksgiving and prayer you will have something much better and stronger than anything chemistry can come up with.
4. What are you going to do about it? Please write down something that you will do this week to grow your love and compassion for others.