



1 Thessalonians

Christian Conduct & The Lord's Return

1 Thessalonians 4:9–12

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Introduction

In our previous study, Paul began giving the Thessalonians a series of exhortations regarding godly living. The first of these was moral purity (4:1–8). The key word when it comes to moral purity is abstinence. As believers we are called to live holy lives, and those who would reject Paul's teachings here will experience God's punishment. The last of the sins Paul admonished the Thessalonians to avoid was defrauding one's brother — another way of referring to adultery (v. 6).

Exhortations Regarding Brotherly Love (4:9–12)

This second series of exhortations is a corollary to the first in that brotherly love is the antithesis of defrauding another believer. We had identified adultery as cheating another believer out of what is rightfully his — his wife. This would have widespread ramifications not only in the two families, but also in the church. Brotherly love, on the other hand, has quite the opposite effect. Instead of cheating and dividing, love will treat others fairly and unite them in common purpose.

The Basis for These Exhortations (vv. 9–10a)

The English word “love” is used two times in verse 9. The first instance is “brotherly love” and comes from the Greek word *philadelphia* (φιλαδελφία). This refers to the love shared by members of the same family. You can see how this is the opposite of an ungodly, adulterous kind of love — shared by members of two *different* families. The second use of love in this verse comes from a different Greek word, *agapāō* (ἀγαπάω). This is a much wider term and refers to a divine or godly kind of love. Although both of these terms are translated as “love” in English, they do have a slightly different meaning that is similar to two different Greek words for “will.” Observe the differences:

Terms for “will”

boulomai (βούλομαι)

thelō (θέλω)

Meaning

to be willing, minded, or intending

to wish, prefer, or delight in

Now notice the differences in the terms for “love,” taken from Strong’s Dictionary:

Terms for “love”

philadelphia (φιλαδελφία)

agapaō (ἀγαπάω)

Meaning

to be a friend to, to have affection for, to have a personal attachment as a matter of sentiment or feeling.

the judgment and deliberate assent of the will on principle.

So *thelō* can be thought of as a heart desire, whereas *boulomai* is a mind decision. Similarly *philadelphia* is a matter of the heart, while *agapaō* is a matter of the mind.

This becomes particularly significant in verses like John 3:16 where “God so loved (*agapaō*) the world.” God made a mind decision to love those who were His mortal enemies — rebellious humanity who had thumbed their noses at Him by their sins. This kind of love directed God’s actions in sending His Son to die on the cross.

But we should not take this too far, thinking that *agapaō* is only a head thing. We cannot say, as some do, “I have to *love* them, but I don’t have to *like* them.” That doesn’t make any sense. These two kinds of love, *agapaō* and *philadelphia*, go together.

They had been Taught to Love (v. 9)

In this verse, we see that the Thessalonians were already practicing *philadelphia* for one another. The reason for this is that they had first been taught by God to *agapaō* one another. We should note here that although their brotherly love was occurring somewhat naturally by this point, it began with godly *agapaō* love. This should be instructive for us. When we choose to put godly love in the driver’s seat, our emotional, heartfelt love will follow. This has been proven in the secular world as well. Studies have shown that when you are nice to somebody, you will actually begin to like them more.

The secular world, however, cannot understand where that choice to love comes from. As believers, we recognize that it is a lesson learned through the illuminating work of the Spirit bringing God’s Word to bear in our lives (1 John 2:27; 4:7–14).

They had been Expressing Love (v. 10a)

This is one of the most remarkable testimonies in all of Scripture. As a whole, this church had been showing brotherly love all throughout the region in which they lived. They were accomplishing this by not shunning any opportunity to love others. This is one of the reasons that their testimony had spread so quickly throughout the area (1 Thess 1:7–8). This kind of outpouring of brotherly love was highly unusual and set these believers apart from their unbelieving neighbors. But remember, this brotherly kind of love and concern began with godly love for others (v. 9)!

The Responsibility of Believers to Love (vv. 10b–11)

Love was certainly not a problem for the church in Thessalonica, but once again Paul exhorts them to continue in this. So why the exhortation?

Abounding in Love (v. 10b)

The Scriptures teach the absolute necessity of progressive sanctification (cf. James 2:14–26). Part of that process involves loving others, not just once, but with an ever increasing measure. The idea is that love would super-abound in our lives! Think about it this way: the Thessalonian church had avoided no opportunity to show love for others, and yet they could do more. Super-abounding means taking the best we can do and doing it better!

Minding Our Own Affairs (v. 11a)

Paul opens verse 11 by addressing the specific issue that had caused him to leave Thessalonica. Recall that the Jews had stirred up a mob that went after Jason and the other believers because they didn't like what Paul was doing (Acts 17:5–10). In contrast to those events, Paul's exhortation here is to live a quiet life. This means we strive not to draw attention to ourselves by stirring up conflict, while at the same time humbly obeying God. Sometimes obeying God will necessarily bring about conflict, but that is not the issue here. Paul is addressing *unnecessary* conflict. The second exhortation in this verse is similar to the first. Minding our own business means that we are not interfering or intruding unnecessarily into the lives of others (cf. Gal 6:1).

Working to Provide for Ourselves (v. 11b)

The last exhortation in this section is that we work with our hands. This is another way of saying that we need to be engaged in gainful

employment, which can provide for our needs. Here we see a clear teaching on the Christian work ethic. There is no freeloading! God has ordained that we must work in order to eat (2 Thess 3:10).

At this point we may ask ourselves, “How does living quietly, minding my own business, and working with my own hands serve as an expression of brotherly love?” For the answer, we only need consider the counterpoints. Creating strife, being a meddler, and freeloading off of others are great ways to despise people by sowing hatred and discord.

The Goal in Practicing Brotherly Love (v. 12)

Walking properly means having conduct that is praiseworthy by all, especially by unbelievers — those outside the faith. Paul is concerned that believers have a good reputation with the larger unbelieving community so as not to bring reproach on the name of Lord, or cause problems that would hinder the work of the gospel. Not being in need of anything implies that God has given means by which He will meet the needs of believers, i.e. gainful employment. But we need to be careful how we define a “need.” The Lord promised that if we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, then all these things will be added unto us (Matt 6:33). What are “these things?” The context tells us: food, drink, and clothing.

In our modern culture, this principle of a Christian work ethic has been somewhat skewed by the invention of government welfare and unemployment programs. But the Scriptural principle is clear: we need to be going about productive work. In a tough economy, this may mean taking on a job that is not exactly in line with our training, or even flipping hamburgers if necessary. The church is instructed not to financially support someone who refuses to seek out gainful employment (2 Thess 3:6–15). But God will honor those who follow a Christian work ethic.

Conclusion

Paul’s goal in having believers practice brotherly love is that we would have a good testimony and not be dependent upon the support of others. God has taught us how to put this into practice through His Word. With the help of His Spirit, we too can multiply our testimony throughout this community. Are you taking advantage of every opportunity to love? ~AWB