

Sermon

Love One Another (1 Thess. 4:9-12)

Pastor Jerry Truex; July 24, 2011

A. Introduction

Today we continue our series of 1 Thessalonians. Beginning with chapter 4, Paul has shifted focus from more-or-less praising the Thessalonians to moral exhortation.¹

1 Thess. 4:1-12 is really one unit, which we divided it into two parts. Last week, we looked first half of the unit (4:1-8) and the issue of *holiness*. This week, we will look at the second half of the unit (4:9-12) and the issue of *loving one another*.

B. Brotherly & sisterly Love

⁹ Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; ¹⁰ and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia.

⁹ Περὶ δὲ τῆς φιλαδελφίας οὐ χρεῖαν ἔχετε γράφειν ὑμῖν, αὐτοὶ γὰρ ὑμεῖς θεοδίδακτοὶ ἐστε εἰς τὸ ἀγαπᾶν ἀλλήλους, ¹⁰ καὶ γὰρ ποιεῖτε αὐτὸ εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς [τοὺς] ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ Μακεδονίᾳ.

Paul begins by writing the words, “now concerning” (περὶ δὲ), which is a phrase he uses to address issues he has been asked to respond to.² We can guess that the Thessalonians have asked Paul to write about the issues raised in verses 9-12.

1. “Love of the brothers/sisters” (= *philadelphia*)

First, Paul writes, “Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters.” The phrase, “love of the brothers and sisters,” is just one word in the Greek, *philadelphia* (φιλαδελφία). This word combines *phil-* (love/friendship) with *adelphos/ē* (sister/brother). This is family language.

Paul is addressing the issue of whether the church should be seen as a family. The earliest followers of Jesus saw themselves a members of Jesus’ family; and “families in the ancient world, and sometimes in the modern, share all things in common, often having common ownership of a business as well as a home, and helping each other financial as need arises.”³

¹ Gordon D Fee. *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* (New International Commentary on the New Testament (Kindle Edition; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2009).

² The phrase, “now concerning the matters about which you wrote” in 1 Cor. 7:1(cf. 7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12).

³ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians* (Kindle Edition. Westminster John Know, 2011).

Apparently, the Thessalonians wonder about this. So they asked Paul, "Should we treat the members of the church like family, like brothers and sisters?"

2. "You are God-taught" (= *theodidaktoi*)

Second, Paul says, "You do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God." They know the answer to their own question.

The NRSV has "you yourselves *have been taught* by God." The verb is actually present tense, so I translated it as "you are God-taught" (ὁμεῖς θεοδίδακτοί ἐστε).⁴

Paul is using a unique term, *theodidaktoi* (θεοδίδακτοι), which literally means God-taught, combining *theos* (God) and *didaktos* (taught).

The word occurs here for the first time in Greek literature, so it is likely that Paul coined the term. He may have coined the term to differentiate it from the word, *autodidaktos*, which means "self-taught," a term used by ancient philosophers.⁵ For Paul, what mattered was is not being *self-taught*, but *God-taught*.

This is somewhat surprising. Paul seems to be claiming they are taught by God directly without human mediation or a reference to scripture.

If so, then Paul is suggesting that people who teach about the Way of Christ are not necessary, though they might be helpful. The idea God directly teaches people is supported by many biblical passages:⁶

John 6:45. It is written in the prophets, "And they shall all be taught by God [καὶ ἔσονται πάντες διδακτοὶ θεοῦ]." Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. (NRSV)

Isaiah 54:13. All your children shall be taught by the LORD [πάντας τοὺς υἱοὺς σου διδακτοὺς θεοῦ], and great shall be the prosperity of your children (NRSV).

⁴ The NRSV translates ἐστε as a "perfective presence," which is possible, but the ordinary sense of the present tense is action completed at the moment of speaking.

⁵ Epicurus; Jacob W. Elias, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, BCBC (Scottsdale: Herald, 1995) 156.

⁶ John 16:13 When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come (NRSV). Jeremiah 31:34 No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more (NRSV). Hebrews 8:10. This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people (NRSV; cf. 10:16). Psalm 71:17. O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds (NRSV).

1 John 2:27. As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him.
(NRSV)

3. Love one another

Third, Paul identifies what God taught the Thessalonians, indeed, what God teaches us: We are to “love one another.” The phrase, “love one another,” occurs 27 times in the NT.⁷

In fact, the idea that we are to love one another defines what it means to be Jesus’ disciple.

John 13:34-35. I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (NRSV)

In addition, when we love one another, John says it proves we are *born of God* and we *know God*.

1 John 4:7-8. Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. (NRSV)

John says one more thing. When we love one another, something else happens—*God lives in us*.

1 John 4:12. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. (NRSV)

Notice what 1 Jn. 4:12 says: “If we love one another, God *continues to live* in us.”⁸

The verb, “lives” (μένει), is in the present tense. So we can translate it as God *continues to live, continues to remain, or continues to abide* in us.⁹ When God lives

⁷ For example: Jn. 13:34-35 (3xs); 15:12, 17; Rom 12:10; 13:8 (2xs); 2 Cor. 13:11; Gal. 5:13; Eph. 4:2; 1 Thess. 3:12; 4:9; 2 Thess. 1:3; Heb. 10:24; 1 Pet. 1:22; 3:8; 4:8; 5:14; 1 John 3:11, 14, 16, 23; 4:7, 11, 12; 2 John 1:5.

⁸ 1 John 4:12: θεὸν οὐδεὶς πώποτε τεθέαται. ἐὰν ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους, ὁ θεὸς ἐν ἡμῖν μένει καὶ ἡ ἀγάπη αὐτοῦ ἐν ἡμῖν τετελειωμένη ἐστίν.

⁹ I’m translating μένει as a “progressive or descriptive present.”

in us, divine love is “perfected, complete, brought to its goal, accomplished.” When we love, we experience union with God and God’s purposes are accomplished in us.

One question remains: What is the connection between “seeing God” and “loving one another”? Why does John connect those two thoughts? What was he thinking?

One answer might be: Although we do not see God physically/outwardly, we do “see” God spiritually/inwardly when we love others.

C. Specific admonitions about love

Right after asserting that the Thessalonians do not need to be taught about love, Paul proceeds to write more on the topic anyway!¹⁰

<p>But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more, ¹¹ to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, ¹² so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one.</p>	<p>Παρακαλοῦμεν δὲ ὑμᾶς, ἀδελφοί, περισσεύειν μᾶλλον ¹¹ καὶ φιλοτιμεῖσθαι ἡσυχάζειν καὶ πράσσειν τὰ ἴδια καὶ ἐργάζεσθαι ταῖς [ιδίαις] χερσὶν ὑμῶν, καθὼς ὑμῖν παρηγγείλαμεν, ¹² ἵνα περιπατῆτε εὐσχημόνως πρὸς τοὺς ἕξω καὶ μηδενὸς χρεῖαν ἔχητε.</p>
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1. (Let cruciform love) abound more and more

First, Paul encourages the Thessalonians to let their love “abound more and more.” He already said they showed love to “all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia.” Now Paul wants them to build on this work, to increase it, and to let it overflow.

We are left wondering exactly what they did to show love to all Macedonia. We can guess that since the city of Thessaloniki was a center through which people traveled, the Thessalonians became well-known for “hospitality and practical helpfulness” for travelers and strangers.¹¹

Still, Paul does not describe or define “love” in this context. So we need to turn elsewhere to learn about Paul’s understanding of love. The place to turn is Phil. 2:3-8,¹² where he presents Jesus as the model of divine love.

¹⁰ Phrasing similar to Jacob W. Elias, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, BCBC (Scottsdale: Herald, 1995) 157.

¹¹ Jacob W. Elias, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, BCBC (Scottsdale: Herald, 1995) 164. If we consider Heb. 13:1ff, which talks about “Letting mutual love continue” (Ἡ φιλαδελφία μενέτω), mutual love would include “hospitality to stranger, identification with people in prison, respect for the sanctity of marriage, and unselfish contentment regarding material things (13:2-5)” (162).

¹² Phil. 2:3-8. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be

Phil. 2:3-8 describes Jesus' love as *cruciform love*; that is, Jesus demonstrated that divine love is self-giving and self-sacrificing for the sake of others, even to the point of physical death or, perhaps just as hard, the death of our own ego or false self.

Cruciform love seeks the welfare of others and it is only possible when we are

- nonattached to the results of our action and
- nonattached to the selfish demands of our ego or false self.

Cruciform love is only possible if we yield or submit to God, that is, trust God so much we don't worry about the outcomes of our actions, but just let God take care of it.

I think Paul has *cruciform love* in mind when he speaks about love, but he doesn't say this in 1 Thessalonians. Whatever Paul thought "love" was, the Thessalonians were doing everything right.

2. Stop presuming on others

That is why we are not prepared for what Paul says in verse 11-12. Apparently, some of Thessalonians were taking advantage of the love offered by the rest.¹³ So Paul gives three admonitions to correct this misbehavior.

a. Aspire to live quietly

Paul's first admonition is, "aspire to live quietly" (φιλοτιμείσθαι ἡσυχάζειν).

Paul's concern is not with "speaking quietly." Rather, the "quite" has to do with not disrupting the lives of others.¹⁴ The "quiet" has to do with not intruding on other peoples' lives or becoming a burden to them, which is made clear by the next two admonitions.

b. Mind your own affairs / accomplish you own stuff

Paul's second admonition is, "Mind your own affairs." I would translate this, "Accomplish your own stuff" (πράσσειν τὰ ἴδια) or, as the KJS has it, "Do your own business."

exploited,⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death--even death on a cross.(NRSV)

¹³ Gordon D Fee. *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* (New International Commentary on the New Testament (Kindle Edition; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2009).

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It's a call to be self-responsible and not constantly asking someone else to do things for you. Paul is saying, "Be self-reliant and don't manipulate other people into doing your stuff."

c. Work with your own hands

The third admonition is, "Work with your own hands" (ἐργάζεσθαι ταῖς [ἰδίαις] χερσὶν ὑμῶν). Here, Paul encourages people, to the best of their ability "to find paid employment, which Paul assumes will be manual work."¹⁵

If people have the ability to work and they get work, then the church will have more resources to help those who have real needs.

3. Results

Paul says there is a twofold result.

a. That you may behave/walk properly

The first result concerns outsiders: "So that you may behave/walk properly toward outsiders" (περιπατῆτε εὐσχημόνως πρὸς τοὺς ἕξω).

This is a missional concern. People who claim to follow Christ ought to walk as he did. If we claim to be Christians, and we don't live as he did, then we misrepresent Christ to the world.

b. That you may be dependent on no one

The second result focuses within the family of Christ: "So that you may be dependent on no one" (μηδεὶνὸς χρεῖαν ἔχητε).

If people tend to their own concerns, are self-responsible and self-sufficient, then the church will be better able to care for those in genuine need.

D. Reflections

Paul tells us three things:

1. We are to let *philadelphia* or *family love* overflow throughout the church.

¹⁵ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians* (Kindle Edition. Westminster John Know, 2011).

2. When we “love” with *cruciform love*, God lives in us and God’s purposes are accomplished through us.
3. We should be *self-responsible* and not presume on other people’s love to handle our affairs.

Philadelphia, cruciform love, self-responsibility—these three things—will glorify God.