

VI. The Will of God

November 17/18, 2010

1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Aim: To understand that the will of God for our lives is our total and thorough-going sanctification, so that we can walk in a manner that pleases God.

Paul's subject matter up till now has been largely concerned with his own behavior and counteracting his critics. Now he begins to counsel his converts; his chief objective is to give practical instruction to the Christians in Thessalonica as to how they should behave. From 4:1 to the end of the body of the letter (5:22), Paul's primary purpose was to exhort the church to strive for spiritual excellence.

It seems likely that Timothy had alerted Paul to a number of problems in the life of the church. 1 Thessalonians 5:14 suggests that there were three groups of people in the church who were causing concern: the 'weak' who needed supporting, the 'unruly' who needed warnings, and the 'faint-hearted' who needed encouragement.

Paul begins by dealing with the 'weak' in 4:3-8. Sexual temptation threatens the Christian at the level of one of the most basic and potent urges. Would these believers find the strength to resist? Secondly, Paul concerned himself with the 'unruly' in 4:9-12. This translates a Greek word which was originally used to describe the attitude of an insubordinate soldier, someone who was argumentative and rebellious. By Paul's day it had come to be applied to schoolboys who played truant. The apostle used the term to describe people who were absconding from their work. Thirdly, Paul addressed himself to the 'faint-hearted,' an element in the fellowship who were concerned about their departed loved ones (4:13-18) and indeed about their own hopes for salvation (5:1-11).

A. A General Exhortation (1 Th. 4:1-2)

There is always a danger of Christians thinking they have no further need to progress in sanctification; but this side of eternity, no believer has even come close to what God desires for him spiritually (cp. Phil. 3:12-16). Thanks to Paul's solid instruction when he was with them, the saints were living exemplary lives and he had commended them for that (1:2-4, 7; 2:13-14). As a result, they might have thought their condition was ideal and in no need of improvement. But Paul knew they could do better and encourage them accordingly.

1. Transition (4:1a)

Finally then, brethren...

The words 'Finally, then...' (*λοιπόν οὖν, Loipon oun*) are not so much an indication that he is about to finish, but rather that a new and important section of the epistle is beginning. Paul often uses the word 'finally' to signal a change of direction in his thoughts (cp. Eph. 6:10; Phil. 3:1; 2 Th. 3:1). He is not coming to the end of what he has to say, but he is coming to the final section of his letter. He now wants to turn to matters relating more directly to their present needs.

The issues that Paul takes up in this closing section are of a practical rather than a doctrinal nature. While they are closely related to the great doctrines of the gospel, they do not concern them directly. The Thessalonians do not seem to have been bothered by threatening heresies in

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the same way that the Galatians churches were. Their troubles were connected with the outworking of the gospel in practical Christian life.

2. Abound (4:1b)

...we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more...

Paul begins in a general way by encouraging the church to make further progress in its new way life. Clearly, he had taught them about the Christian life while with them. For Paul, missionary work was more than preaching the good news that Jesus was God's Messiah, the Savior of the world. It also involved instructing new believers how they were to live in order to please God.

There is still plenty of room for progress. Therefore, Paul asks and urges them in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. The Thessalonians are to continue abounding more and more in their walking and pleasing God. 'Urge' or 'request' (*ἐρωτώμεν, erōtōmen*) denotes a gentle, humble suggestion offered among equals. Similarly, 'exhort' (*παρακαλοῦμεν, parakaloumen*) means 'to come alongside and encourage.' His 'asking' them might be the affectionate request of a friend, and his 'urging' them the more authoritative demand of an apostle. Paul exhibited much humility and pastoral warmth toward these faithful believers. This blending of affection and authority lives at the heart of pastoral effectiveness.

Paul's attitude was gracious and considerate, with just enough urgency that they accepted his exhortation not to be content with their spiritual growth but to 'excel still more.' 'Excel' (*περισσεύητε, perisseuēte*) means 'to abound, to be abundantly supplied, to overflow, to exist in full quantity, to be over and above and around, to be advanced. Paul tells the Thessalonians he was intent that they become spiritually extraordinary, that they 'excel' to a higher degree. Paul's priority for believers was spiritual progress motivated by a desire to know God (cp. Ps. 42:1).

3. Walk (4:1c)

...just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God...

The power for excelling does not operate in a vacuum. It works according to scripturally delineated, time-tested, God-approved principles. Paul refers to the divine principles, spiritual truths, and gospel doctrine that the Thessalonians had received from him and his companions when they first arrived in Thessalonica. Paul taught them how they 'ought to walk,' or conduct their daily lives.

Paul's exhortation to the Thessalonians was a confirmation of that fact and a reminder to them to keep progressing, just as they already actually did walk. They were on the pathway of progressive sanctification, and Paul wanted them to stay on it and have the patient, determined mind-set of the long-distance runner.

Both Paul and John often use 'walk' (*περιπατεώ, peripateō*) figuratively to describe a person's conduct, whether in the context of God-honoring activity or sinful activity. It is another reminder that the Christian life involves everything that a person does. As they walk in daily obedience, believers gradually but surely become more and more like Christ. Paul's use of the term 'walk' includes the idea that believers must not be static. Are we making progress? Are we getting somewhere?

The crux of it all was the principle that they should live so as to 'please God.' The Christian's new life is first of all a life governed by a relationship rather than by rules. The gospel reconciles

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us to God and creates a vital personal relationship with Him. Our new life is lived out of the context of this wonderful relationship. Specifically it is a life bent on pleasing God. While we can never merit God's favor, we can live in ways that please Him. Whatever the situation, whatever the circumstances, the child of God is to please his Father. This in itself is profoundly challenging.

4. Commandments (4:2)

...for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

This appeal is reinforced by a reminder that the original instructions the Thessalonians had received had been on the authority of the Lord Jesus. In fact, Paul heightens the idea that he was merely acting as the Lord's messenger. The word 'commandments' (*παράγγελίας, parangelias*) has a decidedly military feel to it and is often used in military contexts or in connection with rulers. It describes strong, authoritative orders delivered by a commanding officer to his subordinates. Paul passed on instructions the same way that a military courier passes on orders from a superior officer. His words had the full authority of the Lord Jesus behind them.

Paul is making sure the Thessalonians realize, in the first place, that the following hortatory section will not include additional commands that he had not already given them when he was in Thessalonica, and, secondly, that his authority for these commands comes from Christ, not from man. Paul's directives did not originate from some arbitrary human sanction or some remote ecclesiastical authority. Instead they came directly from Jesus Christ.

Christ, the liberator of Christians, has brought them new life, and this new life has a positive ethical content. It was new life in Christ, and was to be recognized by those features which belonged to the character of Christ. Christ led a life that brought pleasure to God, and taught His followers how to live so as to please God. Christians, who seek to know God better, to love Him more, and to obey Him more thoroughly, must live according to the commands of Scripture. Such believers will then experience growth toward spiritual excellence, through the power of the indwelling Christ and by their obedience to the truth of the Word.

To sum up, in this introduction to the exhortation section of the letter Paul positively tells the Thessalonians that they are currently walking well in their Christian life, but he is also encouraging them to do even better. He reminds them that this walking has been, and must continue to be, consistent with his commands that come from the authority of Christ.

B. An Exhortation on Sexual Purity (1 Th. 4:3-8)

1. A General Statement of God's Will (4:3a)

For this is the will of God, your sanctification...

Verse 3 begins with a general statement. What does please God? The sanctification of His people. The word 'sanctification' (Greek: *ἁγιασμός, hagiastosmos*) is derived from a Latin word which means 'holy' (Greek: *ἅγιος, hagiios*). Coming from the Old Testament, 'holy' carries the related connotations of 'separate' and 'morally pure.' To sanctify someone is to make him or her holy. His will is precisely that we should be holy, as He Himself is holy (Lev. 11:44, 45; 1 Pe. 1:15, 16).

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Paul uses ‘sanctification’ and its cognates in two ways. The first, often called ‘definitive sanctification,’ indicates the state of a Christian in which there has been a radical break from his non-Christian past and he is now deemed ‘holy’. In this way, the term is used in a more objective sense to refer to the state of believers through their union with Christ (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:2, 30). Through faith in Him we are set apart to God and become saints (Rom. 1:7).

The second sense in which the word is used (and as it is used here), denotes the process of becoming more and more holy throughout the Christian life, commonly referred to either as ‘sanctification’ or as ‘progressive sanctification.’ It refers to the process whereby the Christian co-operates with the Holy Spirit to grow in Christlikeness, to become holy. God actively desires spiritual progress on the part of His people. It is a subjective or inner work of transformation within us that God accomplishes through His Spirit. Gradually and progressively we are freed from all that defiles and transformed into the image of Jesus (2 Cor. 3:18). Sanctification in this sense is the process that leads to holiness.

2. A Specific Example of God’s Will (4:3b-6a)

a) *Abstain from Sexual Immorality (4:3b)*

...that you should abstain from sexual immorality...

Having stated God’s purpose, Paul adds immediately the specific application that the Thessalonians are to avoid sexual immorality. This is not to say that sanctification is limited to achieving sexual purity, but it does mean that God’s transforming grace must be at work in this specific area.

Paul wanted to see sanctification at work in a particular area of Christian character, namely sexual morality. In these verses Paul emphasizes that there is only one context for the expression of human sexuality, the union of one man and one woman in a lifelong covenant of friendship known as marriage. This would have seemed very strange to first-century Greeks.

(1) Greek Culture

Every form of sexual permissiveness and vice was rampant in the Greco-Roman world of the first century, and its expression had freest rein in major port cities like Thessalonica. More than likely, many of the church members had themselves been caught up in immoral relationships before conversion.

It was accepted that a man did not marry for friendship but to provide a mother for his legitimate offspring and a manager for his home. Adultery was winked at; there was no stigma attached to his taking a mistress. As for more casual liaisons, the possibilities were endless. It was not difficult to take advantage of any female slaves in the household and there were always harlots. Indeed, prostitution and religion often went hand in hand. Fornication with prostitutes who were on the staff of many temples was part and parcel of the ritual demanded by certain cults of the period. To add to the picture, homosexual relationships were condoned, even applauded.

The general attitude is frequently illustrated by a quotation from Demosthenes’ oration *Against Neaera*: ‘We keep mistresses for pleasure, concubines for our day-to-day bodily needs, but we have wives to produce legitimate children and serve as trustworthy guardians of our homes.’ That was the outlook of a reputable citizen of Athens in the fourth century BC. Hence, the temptations to sexual sins were great. Over against this, Paul taught a high view of marriage.

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(2) Sexual Immorality

In view of the permissive culture in Thessalonica, Paul considered abstention from sexual immorality to be the first priority in the Thessalonians' devotion to sanctification. It may be that Timothy, on his return from Thessalonica, reported an undesired laxity in sexual relations in the church there. Chastity is not the whole of sanctification, but it is an important element in it, and one which had to be specially stressed in the Greco-Roman world of that day.

'Abstain' (*ἀπέχεσθαι, apechesthai*) means complete abstinence, in this case, staying completely away from any thought or behavior that violates the principles of God's Word and results in any act of sexual sin.

Paul deliberately uses a broad or inclusive term, the Greek word *porneias* (*πορνείας*), to indicate that he has in view a range of sexual aberrations. In context, it means any sexual activity outside of marriage, including fornication, adultery, homosexuality, incest, prostitution, and bestiality. He urges an absolute break with such practices. This was a strange notion in the pagan society to which the gospel was first brought; there various forms of extramarital sexual union were tolerated and some were even encouraged. The Christian life is to be marked by both radical restraint and purity in the sexual realm.

The language here is similar to that of the Jerusalem decree (Acts 15:20, 29). It might not be irrelevant to recall that Silas was one of the two commissioners appointed by the leaders of the Jerusalem church to carry the letter embodying the decree to the church of Antioch and her daughter-churches (Acts 15:22, 27).

b) Possess Your Vessel (4:4)

...that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor...

Bible students have long held different views on what these words are actually saying. One interpretation suggests they refer to the control of our natural sexual urges. Others contend, however, that they are saying that sexual desires are to be fulfilled within marriage, and that in a restrained and honorable way. The two interpretations hinge on how the Greek words *ktasmai* (*κτάσμαι*) and *skeuos* (*σκεῦος*) are understood. The former can be translated 'control' or more commonly 'acquire' or 'possess.' The latter word means 'vessel' and is used metaphorically for utensils, implements or tools. In context can refer to either 'body' or 'wife' depending on the interpretation.

(1) Acquire Your Wife

Some commentators have argued that the word translated 'vessel' refers not to a man's wife but to his own body. The argument is essentially that to compare a wife to a vessel is uncomplimentary. However, 'wife' seems the most likely rendering of the disputed word for the following reasons.

First, the word translated 'possess' actually means to acquire or take. A man may acquire a wife, but has a body from the onset. Second, the word 'vessel' is used as a metaphor for human beings in the New Testament (cp. 2 Cor. 4:7). In one place, it is even used of wives, who are described as 'weaker vessels' (1 Pe. 3:7). Third, since Paul is making a stern case against adultery and fornication, the natural way to read this passage is that he is not so much saying that these are sins against one's own body, but contrasting them with marriage. Within the married

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relationship, sexual relations are holy and honorable. Outside it, they are sinful and shameful. Finally, Paul's argument here anticipates a fuller statement of the same principle in 1 Cor. 7:2-9.

(2) Control Your Body

It seems unlikely that Paul means wife here. Paul is inculcating a high view of marriage, and it is a very low view that thinks of the wife as no more than a vessel for gratifying the husband's sexual desires. The definition of 'vessel' as 'wife' does not fit the context of the usual meaning of the word. In 1 Peter 3:7, the wife is not spoken of as the husband's 'vessel' at all. Both are 'vessels of the Holy Spirit, the wife being the weaker. She is certainly not her husband's vessel—indeed, although she herself is called a 'vessel,' the expression 'weaker vessel' refers more particularly to her body (as the 'vessel' in the present text is the man's body).

The sense of 'body' for *skeuos* is suggested by other metaphorical occurrences of the word in the Pauline writings, especially 2 Cor. 4:7. In Acts 9:15 Paul himself is called the Lord's 'chosen instrument' (*σκεῦος ἐκλογῆς, skeuos eklogēs*) for the propagation of the gospel. Thus, the meaning seems to lean toward 'body.' Paul is then exhorting his Thessalonian friends to keep their bodies pure.

Believers must maintain self-control over the desires of their flesh. 'Know' is from *oida*, which carries the idea of having the knowledge or skill necessary to accomplish a desired goal. Every Christian needs to know himself well, so as to understand his weaknesses and evil propensities. A Christian is to 'control his own vessel' (*i.e.*, body); in other words, not to engage in sexual activity outside of marriage.

'Sanctification' means to be set apart from sin to God, for the purpose of living a pure and holy life. 'Honor' is the result of separation from sin. 'Honor' includes appropriate respect for ourselves, for our spouses, for those to whom we are not married to, and for God. The goal is positive – pursue separation and virtue with all one's heart.

Whichever the precise meaning intended, the general message is clear. Christians are to curb their natural sexual instincts and express them in a way that is holy and honorable.

c) *Not Like the Gentiles (4:5)*

...not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God...

Paul's teaching also has something to say about the nature of sexual conduct within marriage. The married relationship is not a legalized sexual free-for-all. The body belongs to the Lord and must be consecrated to Him. 'Honor' is contrasted with 'the passion of lust.' A wife or a husband is more than a tool for sexual gratification. Christians are not to live in passionate lust, gripped and borne along by their desires. They are to differ from their pagan neighbors and not share the lifestyle of those who do not know God.

'Passion' (*πάθος, pathos*) means 'uncontrollable desires, compelling feelings, overpowering urges,' and has a negative connotation here. 'Lustful' (*ἐπιθυμίας, epithumias*) refers to an out-of-control craving, usually for that which is unrighteous or illegitimate. Christians cannot any longer live in the same unwholesome patterns of sin that the godless people do.

The expression 'Gentiles, who do not know God' is probably an allusion to Jeremiah 10:25 and the parallel passage in Psalm 79:6-7. He connects 'knowing God' with 'sanctification and honor' and links 'who do not know God' with 'passion of lust.' Hence, for Paul, true Christian religion and morality are necessarily related.

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d) Do Not Defraud (4:6a)

...that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter...

A third practical, unambiguous principle emerges from the Apostle Paul's admonition to the Thessalonians on sexual morality: they should never sexually take advantage of other believers. The word rendered 'take advantage of' or 'transgress' (*ὑπερβαίνεω*, *hyperbaineō*) means 'to sin against,' which includes the concept of stepping over the line and exceeding lawful limits. Here it is crossing a forbidden boundary, and hence trespassing (sexually) on territory which is not one's own.

'In this matter' (*ἐν τῷ πράγματι*, *en tō pragmati*) refers to sexual immorality, not a business deal (*i.e.*, 'in this matter under discussion'). On the basis of the verb 'defraud' (*πλεονεκτέω*, *pleonekteō*), some throughout church history have seen this as referring to improper business dealings. It is best to see this as referring to sexual immorality for three reasons: firstly, the connection to the second part of 1 Th. 4:3 is so strong; secondly, in Greek there is no 'and' at the beginning of verse 6 to indicate a significant new thought; and, thirdly, the word 'defraud' can easily be associated with sexual sins. 'Defraud' means to selfishly, greedily take something for personal gain and pleasure at someone else's expense.

Paul recognizes that immorality affects other people as well as the principal offenders. Knowing that sexual immorality is always a breach of love, Paul insists that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. Paul's use of terms like 'take advantage' and 'defraud' remind us that such considerations as the betrayal of one's own partner and the theft of another's come into play.

Adultery is probably the vice that is foremost in Paul's mind when he mentions this. Adultery is primarily about broken promises and ruthless self-assertion. He recognizes that it is still a threat within the Christian community in Thessalonica. Like a fraud in the world of commerce, an adulterer invades the rights of others and plunders what is not lawfully his. This must not happen among Christians.

This exhortation to sexual purity is probably to be recognized as the first instance of the writers' resolve to make good the deficiencies in the faith of their Thessalonian friends, since it was not practicable at present to make them good by a personal visit and face-to-face conversation.

3. Reasons for Following God's Will (4:6b-8)

Paul gives three reasons, or motivations, why the Thessalonians should be sexually pure. In the course of these three reasons, the three persons of the Trinity are mentioned.

a) The Son Avenges (4:6b)

...because the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified.

The apostle reinforces these frank and strong directions with a stern warning. He reminds his readers that the sexually immoral will face God's judgment. Only God has the right to exact vengeance for the sins people commit (cp. Rom. 12:19; Dt. 32:35). In the light of the references in 2 Th. 1:7-12, 'Lord' (*κύριος*, *kyrios*) here refers to Christ. Paul is certainly alluding to the Old Testament concept that God is an 'avenger' (*ἐκδικος*, *ekdikos*) against evil and is probably referring specifically to Psalm 94:1. The only other NT instance of *ekdikos* uses the word of the civil magistrate (Rom. 13:4). In 2 Th. 1:8 it is the Lord Jesus who will mete out *ekdikēsis* (*ἐκδίκησις*) or 'retribution' on the ungodly.

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If a believer engages in sexual immorality, God the avenger may judge all these things by allowing one or more of several consequences to affect that believer's life. For example, the outcome could be a severely damaged marriage, accompanied by loss of family love and respect; the sin could lead to a divorce; God may chasten the person by allowing him or her to be afflicted with venereal disease or some other physical affliction; or the sin could result in the absence of blessing, the presence of a greater than average number of trials and troubles, or even an untimely death (cp. 1 Cor. 10:8).

b) The Father Calls (4:7)

For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness.

But the threat of future judgment was not the only reason the Thessalonian Christians needed to avoid all forms of sexual immorality. God's purpose for them as His people was an added motive to purity. He had not called them to be impure, but to live a holy life. The mention of 'uncleanness' (*ἀκαθαρσία, akatharsia*) confirms that the subject of verse 6 is sexual rather than commercial behavior.

That Christians should strive to be sexually moral is in complete accord with God's general plan for their lives. Therefore, a second reason Paul gave for abstaining from sexual immorality was because that command fit God's purpose for the Thessalonians. A life of impurity was inconsistent with believers' high calling. God's purpose in salvation was to produce a people who would walk worthy of the divine call into His kingdom and glory (cp. Eph. 4:1; 1 Th. 2:12).

God's call is not simply summoning us to sanctification, but, in addition, will actually produce its intended effect of 'holiness' (*ἀγιασμόν, hagiasmōn*). This truth, that God's call produces an effect, gives the believer confidence now as he battles against sin in order to be sexually pure.

c) The Spirit Enables (4:8)

Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit.

The final reason for the Thessalonians to obey Paul's admonition was that their disobeying would mean that they were rejecting God's Holy Spirit. Paul has said enough about God's will for their sanctification to make it irrefutably clear that sexual purity is not merely a human ideal but a divine command. To reject Paul's teachings on sexual immorality ('this') is not simply to reject a man, but is equal to rejecting God, the one who gave you the Holy Spirit for your sanctification. The gift of the Holy Spirit demands practical holiness in the lives of those whom He indwells. Paul's emphasis on the Holy Spirit emphasizes the word 'holy' (*hagios*) and intentionally harks back to 'sanctification' (*hagiasmos*) in the previous verse.

To sum up we are to glorify God in our sex lives, both in the things we refrain from doing and the things that we do. The Spirit of God who has taken up residence in the Christian is holy. An undisciplined sex life is one way of grieving Him. The practice of sexual sin violates the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It spurns the Lord's will, disregards His purposes, defies His commands, rejects His love, and flouts and abuses His grace.

C. An Exhortation on Brotherly Love (1 Th. 4:9-12)

Having dealt with those 'weak' individuals who seemed as though their resistance might crumble in the face of sexual temptation, Paul turns his attention to another group whom he describes as

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the ‘unruly.’ This element in the church posed a considerable problem. Their conduct was such that they needed a stiff warning (cp. 5:14).

The fact that Paul sees the antidote to unruly behavior as being honest toil suggests that these people were absconding from their work. Among ancient Greeks, work was often regarded as demeaning: that was what slaves were for! Over against this, there is also the possibility that some had reacted irresponsibly to the widespread excitement about the return of Jesus by giving up their work on the grounds that there was no need for it if the Savior could return at any moment. They seemed to lose their balance and composure and became so zealous and agitated concerning eschatological events that they neglected their everyday duties. Over against this, Paul teaches that Christians are to carry on with their everyday lives and responsibilities until Christ returns.

It appears that this problem of idleness already existed to some degree during Paul’s stay at Thessalonica (2 Th. 3:10). It likely had grown a little worse by the time of Timothy’s visit. To judge from the extended discussion in 2 Th. 3:6-12, the problem appears to have become more serious even after 1 Thessalonians was delivered.

1. What They Do Well (4:9-10)

a) *Brotherly Love Taught by God (4:9)*

But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another...

The use of ‘But concerning’ (*Περί δέ, Peri de*) certainly indicates a new topic. The apostle’s exhortation to love contrasts with what he admonished them concerning immorality and lust.

(1) Brotherly Love

The love that Paul has in mind is specifically ‘brotherly love,’ the love of Christians for one another. The term is a translation of the Greek word *philadelphia* (*φιλαδελφία*), a word originally used to describe the special affection family members felt for one another. Christians, recognizing that they had been born into a great spiritual family soon applied it to the love they felt for one another as brothers and sisters. Except in Christian writings, when this term is used in ancient literature, it almost always refers to natural affection between *biological* brothers and sisters.

Brother love differs somewhat from the love (*ἀγάπη, agape*) Jesus commanded His followers to show to each other and all men (Jn. 13:34). *Agape* is a love that does not depend on the nature of the relationship between people. It is a steady, selfless, self-giving attitude born out of a genuine concern for others irrespective of who they are or what condition they are in. Of course, we are to show this self-denying love toward each other as Christians. But as we do so in the context of our new family relationship, this love takes on a quality of closeness, affection and mutuality they make it proper to call it ‘brotherly love.’

(2) Taught by God

Paul probably means that the Holy Spirit living in their hearts had taught them to love one another. The Thessalonians had not simply been taught *about* the subject of brotherly love; God Himself had actually taught them *to* love.

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Paul may have coined the term ‘taught by God’ (*θεοδιδάκτος, theodidaktos*) as this is the first time it appears in extant Greek literature. It is not a new idea, however (cp. Is. 54:13). How is this teaching by God mediated to the Christian? Paul does not say. He could be referring to the Holy Spirit using apostolic preaching to change the Thessalonians (2:4, 13; 3:12; 4:8), the teachings of Jesus, or he may simply be referring to the instinctive love that a Christian has for others as a consequence of regeneration (Gal. 5:22).

In the expression ‘to love one another,’ Paul uses the more common word for love (*agapaō*, related to the noun *agapē*) as opposed to *phileō*, which is related to *philadelphia*. *Agapaō* expresses the purest, noblest form of love, which is volitionally driven, not motivated by superficial appearance, emotional attraction, or sentimental relationship. Although there are sometimes differences in meaning between these two words for ‘love’ (*agapaō* and *phileō*), this is one of the many examples in the New Testament where both are used in the same way.

b) Brotherly Love Displayed by the Thessalonians (4:10)

...and indeed you do so toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more...

(1) Toward All the Brethren

The brotherly love of the Thessalonian Christians showed itself not only among themselves, but toward other Christians as well. Located as they were in the principal city of Macedonia, the believers in Thessalonica would have often had contact with Christians from other towns and cities in the region, such as Philippi and Berea. They evidently made good use of the line of communication which linked their city with other places in the province (cp. 1:7, 8). Believers all across their region had received their generous hospitality, their kind acts of mercy, and their sacrificial deeds of service. This broad-hearted love for fellow Christians was a mark of the early church.

(2) Increase More and More

As genuine as the love of his readers was for each other, Paul was not satisfied. In one breath he praises them for loving one another, and in the next he urges them to do so more and more. He wanted them ‘to excel still more’ (‘superabound’) in this virtue. No matter how much progress has been made in the Christian life, much more can always be made. So abundant is the new life we have in Christ that we can never contain or exhaust its fullness. In view of the truth that Jesus is returning, Paul urged the Thessalonians to love others more, not less.

Paul commends the Thessalonians for their brotherly love, but, using similar language to that in 4:1, he also ‘exhorts’ (*παρακαλοῦμεν, parakaloumen*) them to ‘abound more’ in this. Here he issues a general instruction to love the brothers more. In 4:11-12, he will give specific applications of this command.

2. What They Need to Improve On (4:11-12)

The idlers in the Thessalonian congregation were probably church members overexcited about the Second Coming of Jesus. Believing this to be very close at hand, they had stopped working and now lived in a state of idle dependence and agitated anticipation. In their misguided enthusiasm they became a nuisance and a burden to the Christian community. They had also brought it into disrepute in the eyes of the watching pagan world. Brotherly love in the church

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had generated a liberality and kindness that loafers were ready to abuse. Paul wants to make it clear that true Christianity expresses itself in a quiet and industrious manner of daily life.

a) Three Exhortations (4:11)

(1) Aspire to a Quiet Life (4:11a)

... that you also aspire to lead a quiet life,...

Paul's first exhortation is a verbal paradox. The word translated 'aspire' or 'ambition' (*φιλοτιμείσθαι, philotimeisthai*) literally means 'to strive for, to press after wholeheartedly.' It is an energetic word. A 'quiet life' or 'inner calm' (*ἡσυχάζεω, hēsuchazeō*) in turn implies a reduction in activity (cp. 1 Tim. 2:2). It means to be silent, not speaking out inappropriately, or remaining at rest and tranquil. Paul, in effect, is telling his readers to strive energetically to be 'quiet,' a remarkable paradox.

The quietness he has in mind, however, is not lethargic passivity. Put simply, he is not saying that Christians are to strive to be lazy! When he speaks of a quiet life, he means a steady and sober life, the kind of life that contrasts with the fervid, restless excitement associated with overheated minds.

Paul seems to be addressing the misapplication of the promise of the Lord Jesus' Second Coming. Excitement bordering on fanaticism had created a noisy and disturbing restlessness among some church members. They could not settle and had become totally unproductive members both of society and of the Christian church. The quietness Paul commends is the complete opposite of this condition. He wants believers to wait eagerly for the coming of the Lord Jesus, but to do so in a sober and steady manner rather than in a condition of unsettled distraction (1 Pe. 4:7).

(2) Mind Your Own Business (4:11b)

...to mind your own business...

Closely connected with this command to live a quiet life is the instruction to mind their own business. Maybe they were bothering others who were working, or perhaps they were becoming overly involved in church decisions concerning who would get financial aid, or it may be a polite way of telling them that they should work. Paul issued them a follow-up exhortation in 2 Th. 3:1-12.

People gripped by novel or unbalanced notions generally cannot confine their convictions to themselves. Their restlessness drives them to invade the privacy of others, often in an arrogant and strident manner. The same peril threatens when people are inactive through idleness. They are inclined to become busybodies, venturing uninvited into the affairs of others, creating hurt and disruption wherever they go (1 Tim. 5:13). It was this plague that Paul wanted to see rooted out of the church in Thessalonica.

(3) Work with Your Own Hands (4:11c)

...and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you...

The antidote to a meddlesome and restless life is one of diligent labor. Paul wanted his readers to make it their ambition to work with their own hands. It would appear from the fuller record in the second letter to the church (2 Th. 3:6-10), that some of the congregation had abandoned their

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daily work. They probably thought that since the return of the Lord Jesus was so near there was really no need to provide for the future. Indeed, they may have thought that to work was to show a lack of faith. As a result, they were likely depending on others' resources to sustain themselves for what they thought would be a brief interlude. It may be, however, that some were simply sponging on the liberality of others. The promise of the Lord's return gave them a reason for being lazy, and the kindness of the new community made it possible for them to live without working.

Paul's opening about brotherly love was necessary because a rightful attitude to work will stem from an awareness of the claims of love. In effect, Paul was urging the point that independence, while it can be overdone, indicates that we love our neighbors. If we turn this on its head it soon becomes clear: love does not sponge on others! This explains his command in verse 11 that all the Christians in Thessalonica should aspire to be productive members of society who paid their own way in the world by working hard. The missionaries themselves had set a good example in the matter of working with their own hands and earning their own living (2:9). Brotherly love demanded sober and industrious habits.

The person who refuses to work when work is available cannot excuse his laziness on the grounds that he is so preoccupied with spiritual things that it would be wrong to descend from his exalted plane to the lowly world of mere physical toil. People like that expect to be fed and clothed through the efforts of others. But love does not take advantage of the generosity of others.

The most fervent expectation of the Lord's return is no reason to abandon daily responsibilities. The best way to prepare for the coming of Christ is to be faithful in the work He has given us to do (Mt. 24:45-51). For many of Paul's readers, that meant busying themselves with the work of their hands.

Interestingly, cultured Greeks despised work of this kind and owned slaves or employed laborers to avoid doing it themselves. Christianity clashed with popular culture at that point. Most of the early Christians came from the working classes, and they considered manual labor as an honorable endeavor. Christianity dignified manual labor as an essential part of God's purpose for man. Here Paul also advocates it as a means of self-support.

b) Two Reasons (4:12)

(1) Outside Witness (4:12a)

...that you may walk properly toward those who are outside...

The apostle gives two reasons for pressing this kind of lifestyle. The first is that their daily life might win the respect of outsiders, that is, non-believers. Paul was insistent that believers should live in a way that wins the respect of the watching world. For Paul, the key to evangelism was the integrity Christians manifest to a sinful, confused, and agitated world. The gospel does not disrupt lawful occupations and social relationships. It makes people better citizens and neighbors, better parents and relatives. The gospel makes people more – rather than less – responsible in the practical affairs of life. Lazy, fanatical, meddling Christians create a stumbling block to conversion. Quiet and diligent lives can make the most degraded pagan look twice at a Christian and his gospel.

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(2) Self-Support (4:12b)

...and that you may lack nothing.

The second reason offered for living a quiet and industrious lifestyle is so that they would not be dependent upon anybody. Not being idle in a manner inappropriate for Christians reduces the need for us to become an improper burden on others. If they obeyed Paul's exhortations, they would not always have to depend on more industrious Christians to supply their livelihood. In one respect, the Christian gospel does encourage people to be dependent upon others. But Paul is not thinking of this kind of mutual dependence here. He is referring to dependence upon others for food and clothing and other daily necessities. Those refusing to work had become parasites on their hard-working but generous neighbors. This was not only a bad witness to the world, it was a burden to the church. Paul's dictum was 'if a man will not work, he shall not eat' (2 Th. 3:10).

The problem of idleness addressed in this passage is not the same as the inactivity resulting from unemployment or disability. One is the result of sloth and self-deception; the other is the outcome of economic or health factors beyond a person's control. The former is cause for shame, the latter calls for understanding and support. It was taken for granted that those who were destitute through no choice of their own would be supported by the church (cp. Eph. 4:28; 1 Tim. 5:3-8); this was a natural function of *philadelphia*.

For next time: Read Revelation 20:1-6.