

How to Express Christian Love

1 Thessalonians 2:17-20

Strong & Ready! (Books of 1 & 2 Thessalonians)

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livinghopechurch.net

Introduction: Open your Bible to 1 Thessalonians 2. I want to bring a teaching to you tonight entitled: “How to Express Christian Love.”

“Let us note that our Lord does not name gifts or miracles or intellectual attainments as the evidence of discipleship, but love, the simple grace of love, a grace within reach of the poorest, lowliest believer, as the evidence of discipleship. If we have no love, we have no grace, no regeneration, no true Christianity!”

– J.C. Ryle

Reading of Holy Scripture

1 Thess. 2:17-20, “But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, 18 because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us. 19 For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? 20 For you are our glory [crown] and joy.”

God’s Purpose for His Church

Most likely you have had the experience of meeting someone who claims to be against “organized religion.” As you probe deeper into why this individual has such feelings, you are more than likely to hear him say something negative about the church. Perhaps he had a bad experience with the church in the past, or maybe he simply has no appetite for God. Whatever the case, the church is not for him.

For others, attending a church has become a “take it or leave it” proposition. They have no real negative feelings about church, nor do they see church as holding any meaningful place in their lives. They are not against the church and they are not for the church. For them, church is simply a place where they may or may not “go” on Sunday mornings.

God never intended the church to be this way. He did not send His Son to die so that we could attend church once a week. The church was never meant to be a weekly family tradition or just another social affiliation. Jesus did not establish His church so that its congregation could keep the lights on, the piano tuned, the preacher paid and the grass mowed. Deep down many of us know that something is missing in our church. We know that God desires so much more for His people than to sing a few songs, listen to a sermon, and give an offering.

What then is the purpose of the church? Why does it exist? Fortunately, the biblical writers provide an answer. Jesus established His church so that a forgiven people “without spot or wrinkle” might “shine like stars in the world” (Eph 5: 27; Phil 2: 15).¹ Peter describes the church in this way: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of the One who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pet 2: 9).

In short, we exist to display the love of God and the God of love. We are to glorify Him, which literally means to “give the right opinion” of Him.

How shall people know that we are Christ’s disciples? By our love one to another (Jn. 13:35).

As J.C. Ryle said, “Let us note that our Lord does not name gifts or miracles or intellectual attainments as the evidence of discipleship, but love, the simple grace of love, a grace within reach of the poorest, lowliest believer, as the evidence of discipleship. If we have no love, we have no grace, no regeneration, no true Christianity!”

Paul’s Defense

In 1 Thess. 2, Paul is continuing to answer his critics. In reply to their accusations that he has deserted the Thessalonians and has no intention of returning, he makes a passionate defense and expresses a deep and genuine yearning to see them again.²

Remember in **Acts 17:10**, we find that after a mob uprising, “The brothers [from the Thessalonica church] immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea...”

We Can’t Do it Alone

In this passage Paul’s profound love for the Thessalonian church is clear. He desired nothing more for them than to grow in their love for one another and to mature in their relationship with Christ. Nearly every word in this passage revolves around their love for Jesus, His love for them, and their love for one another. Paul was fully aware of the strategic importance this church played in the advancement of the gospel in Macedonia and to the entire Roman Empire. He knew, however, that they could not do it alone. They needed to do it together—we yearn to be with each other, we fight together against Satan, and we rejoice together that one day the victory will be won.³

I. Our love is expressed by **yearning**, 1 Thess. 2:17-18a.

Torn Away

1 Thess. 2:17, “But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart...”

Paul says he was “torn away from you,” lit., *bereaved* as a father ripped away from his children. It is the word *orphanos* and could also be translated “orphaned” as a child from his parents. Yet, it ‘applies also to parents deprived of children.’⁴ It’s extremely strong and emotionally graphic.

¹ Howell, Mark (2015-01-13). *Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) (p. 53). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

² Shenton, T. (2006). *Opening up 1 Thessalonians* (p. 49). Leominster: Day One Publications.

³ Ibid, 54-55.

⁴ Earnest Best. *Black’s New Testament Commentary on 1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Hendrickson: Grand Rapids, 1993), 124.

Out of Sight, but Never Out of Mind

The strong bond between Paul and the church, comparable to the bond between loving parent and beloved child, made separation a distress to the apostle although he had only been away from them “for a short time.”⁵

The emphasis is on an unnatural separation, both forcible and painful. At the same time, Paul felt sure that it was only temporary (*for a short time*), and he assured them that it was *in person not in thought*, which we might render: ‘out of sight but never out of mind.’⁶

Great Desire for the Brothers and Sisters

1 Thess. 2:17b, “...we endeavored the more eagerly and with **great desire to see you face to face.**” **Verse 18** says, “because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us.”

Paul had this “great desire” and “endeavored more eagerly... again and again” to see his brothers and sisters in Christ. He tried to contact them “again and again.”

Yet he was hindered by Satan.

Love for the Brothers is a Mark of True Believers

Now we are all growing and changing. We are not where we need to be in our Christian life. But Jesus said that brotherly love is one of the evidences that someone is a true believer. In John 13:34-35, He says, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

The evidence, the proof of Christ in you is your love for one another. Jesus said everyone will know that you are His disciples. This is how everyone, believers and non-believers, will know that we belong to Christ and anyone who is Christ’s is safe and secure in knowing they are born-again.

These words from St. Paul to the Thessalonians are really a fruit of that truth. He says, over and over again, I’ve tried to see you, but Satan hindered me.

Satan Hindered

There are often times when ministers and pastors and shepherds are hindered from ministering the way they want, but the evil creatures of darkness fight against God’s most determined shepherds.

Paul at times had death threats against him that hindered him. Yet the work of the child of God is to pray for his brothers and sisters. We are to pray for those who are out of sight, and never let them go out of mind.

II. Our love is expressed by fighting, 1 Thess. 2:18b.

Spurgeon said, “As soon as you are washed in Christ’s blood and clothed in His righteousness, you must begin to hew your way through a lane of enemies, right up to the eternal throne. Every foot of the way will be disputed; not an inch will Satan yield to you.”⁷

⁵ Martin, D. M. (1995). *1, 2 Thessalonians* (Vol. 33, p. 97). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

⁶ E. J. Bicknell. *The First and Second Epistles to The Thessalonians. Westminster Commentaries* (Methuen and Co.: York, UK, 1932), 28.

⁷ Charles Spurgeon. *Spurgeon's Sermons Volume 14: 1868* (No. 796), "Joshua's Obedience."

1 Thess. 2:18, “...we endeavored the more eagerly and with **great desire to see you face to face** because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us.”

How Satan Hinders

Paul made every effort possible to return to them, though Satan was “breaking up the road and putting up obstacles.”⁸

The word ‘stopped’ means ‘to dig a trench or to blow up the road in front of the enemy to hinder their advance’. The precise details of how Satan stopped them are not given, but what is clear is that Satan within certain limits is able to influence the affairs of men and retard the progress of the gospel.⁹

We Must Fight Until the Day of Redemption

We must fight right up to the Day of Redemption. We must overcome, or we will be overcome. We will persevere. We will be preserved unto the Day of the Lord. But we must fight.

We must not take our enemy too lightly. Before his fall, he beheld the face of the Father. He has a depth of understanding about God which we do not, and yet, he has rebelled against the almighty after seeing him face to face. His evil is beyond our comprehension. If he sought to take on God Himself, do not think he will think twice in destroying you.

Put on the Armor of God

Ephesians 6:10-18, “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. 11 Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. 12 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. 14 Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, 15 and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. 16 In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; 17 and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, 18 praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, 19 and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.”

All of the armor of God revolves around three things: the Spirit of God, the Word of God, and prayer. Be strong in the Lord by receiving the means of grace.

Be Strong!

- Christ’s words, when He said, “Without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).
- Paul says we are to “have no confidence in the flesh”.(Philippians 3:3).
- We are told, “lean not to your own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5).

⁸ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 2, p. 170). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

⁹ Shenton, 50.

The Divine Origin of God's Armor

The Christian's armor is of divine origin. These weapons come at your conversion. It is the "armor of God". It is the armor which God has provided, and which only God gives.

- Belt of Truth: Learn more about "having fastened on the belt of truth" – The Word holds everything together in our lives.
 - Breastplate of Righteousness—righteousness of Christ
 - Shoes of Peace—sharing the Gospel
 - Shield of Faith—relying on Christ as you walk forward
 - Helmet of Salvation — relying on Christ as you look backward and forward
 - Sword of the Spirit—the Word of God
- It's everything you need!!

Not Physical Armor

It is not physical armor. Natural talent or natural education alone will not help us. It can be a blessing, but it is not at all necessary. God's men were for the most part "unlearned men". Mere education will tickle your intellect. "Knowledge puffs up". We do not seek doctrine as a goal, we seek Christ, and in seeking to understand Christ rightly, we learn doctrine, but not for doctrine's sake. Doctrine didn't die for us. Doctrine didn't rise again. Beware of seeking knowledge. **Knowledge, if it does not lead you to Christ, is a carnal weapon.**

- **2 Corinthians 10:4** (ESV) — "For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds."
- **Jeremiah 17:5** (ESV) — "Thus says the LORD: "Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD.""

We've got to fight to show our love. You cannot say you love Christ if you are not willing to fight.

Our Greatest Enemy

Let me also remind you that in our flesh dwells no good thing. There is another enemy within – our flesh. We must understand that our greatest battle is against ourselves!

- John Owen said, "The old man is nailed to the cross, he struggles, strives, and cries out with great strength".
- Abraham Kuyper said, "God's child remains the old man's grave digger until the hour of his own departure."

III. Our love is expressed by **rejoicing**, 1 Thess. 2:19-20.

1 Thess. 2:19-20, "For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? 20 For you are our glory and joy."

A Crown and Joy to Give to Christ

Paul says those our lives touch through our ministry as we minister Christ is the crown that the sovereign gets at His coming? The Thessalonians. They are the victor's wreath (*stephanos*) that Paul will cast before Jesus feet. These crowns belong to Jesus.

At Jesus' coming, the Christians will experience the realization of their 'hope', supreme 'joy', and the 'glory'—wreath of victory in how their life has touched the lives of others.¹⁰

Caveat

We must not interpret Paul's glory in the Thessalonians in a way which conflicts with his affirmations that he will glory only in Christ and his cross. For the Thessalonians are trophies of Christ crucified. What Paul seems to mean, in this transport of love, is that his joy in this world and his glory in the next are tied up with the Thessalonians, whom Christ through the apostle's ministry has so signally transformed.¹¹

Rejoice!

Often Christians get so discouraged. Many times we are characterized by hopelessness and despair. This ought not to be. There is a certain worldview that we all must have.

Paul's focus and view of life is very different. Though he has many trials and cannot even shepherd and minister in the way he ought to, he is not depressed. He is rejoicing in the work of the one who can never be separated from the true child of God.

There will come a day when our joy and crown of rejoicing is the work God has done in each other at the day of Jesus' Second coming! Do you believe in the Second Coming? Do you really?

Worldview

How you respond to what happens to you and around you is filtered through the lens of your worldview. As a Christian you interpret your world through the lens of the Bible. That is why Paul could repeatedly face hardship and still maintain a hopeful outlook. He knew that a sovereign God was overseeing every detail of his life.¹²

The Centrality of the Second Advent in Paul's Theology

This is why Jesus' return was central to Paul's worldview. Even though Paul's stay in Thessalonica was cut short, he had apparently spent a considerable amount of time teaching the infant church about Christ's coming (2 Thess 2:5). He wanted them to view their present circumstances in the light of their future hope.¹³

This instruction in hope was one way Paul expressed his genuine concern for the Thessalonians. As you read 1 Thessalonians, you see that despite Paul's instruction, they still had many questions and concerns about Jesus' return. Yet, even in their confusion, the imminent return of Christ served to remind them of three significant truths:

- Jesus would come to meet His Church face to face.
- All believers would give an account of their lives to God. Therefore, how they lived really did matter.

¹⁰ Shenton, 51.

¹¹ Stott, J. R. W. (1994). *The message of Thessalonians: the gospel & the end of time* (p. 63). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

¹² Howell, 57.

¹³ For a helpful resource on the importance of a Christian worldview, see Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*.

- God would ultimately judge this world according to His perfect justice and righteousness.

These truths were not only important to the early church; they also have significant implications for how you and I live today. Notice three ways that the promise of His coming should impact us.¹⁴

1. *Because of Christ's coming we should rejoice! Do not allow the troubles of life to discourage you.*

– Rejoice, for when Christ comes, you will not be judged, **1 Thess. 1:10**, “[we] wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who **delivers us from the wrath to come.**”

– Rejoice, for we will be rewarded. For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each of His dear children with the eternal inheritance of the Kingdom, prepared for you from the foundation of the world. **Matthew 25:31-34**, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. 34 Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’”

– Rejoice, for God will wipe away all our tears and take away all our pain, **Revelation 21:4**, “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

We will receive a new body at His coming that will never, never die. Death will be conquered, **1 Cor. 15:50-57**, “I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. 51 Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. 53 For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. 54 When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”

55 “O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting?”

56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Christ will one day remove us from our troubles and take us to be with Him (John 14:1-3).

– Rejoice, for our suffering is only for a little while. **Romans 8:18-19, 22-23**, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of

¹⁴ Howell, 57.

God....” Verse 22-23, “For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. 23 And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”

And while may not be able to ignore the things that we experience in this life, we do not have to focus on them. **2 Cor 4:18**, “we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”

2. *Because of Christ’s coming, we should **pursue holiness**.* Jesus’ imminent return is not meant to be a doctrine to paralyze us but a promise that motivates us. When He comes we will be accountable for what we did with Jesus and how we lived for Jesus. Paul’s words of encouragement should call us to action repeatedly:

“But you brothers, are not in the dark, for this day to overtake you like a thief. . . . We do not belong to the night or the darkness. So then, we must not sleep, like the rest, but we must stay awake and be serious” (1 Thess. 5: 4-6).

Peter asks us “what sort of people” ought we to be “in lives of holiness and godliness,” given the reality of the impending return of Christ and the judgment that will befall his earth? (2 Pet. 3:11-13).

John taught over and over that the thought of Christ’s return should motivate us to pursue holiness. **1 John 3:1-3** (NKJV), “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. 2 Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. 3 And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.”

Perhaps the most explicit challenge to us in terms of the practical implications of Christ’s coming is found in **1 Peter 4:7-9**. The “end of all things is at hand,” Peter says. But don’t quit your job or run to the mountains or abandon your family and church. Instead, “... therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. 8 Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. 9 Show hospitality to one another without grumbling..”

3. *Because of Christ’s coming, we should **pray!*** We ought to have an intense motivation to pray. “But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. 35 For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. 36 But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:34-36).

The world is so difficult that we will be tempted to dull our hearts from the pain and weigh them down with the dissipation of worldly distraction (like media) or intoxication from substances. We need to be able to soberly look our pain in the face with hope and “stay awake.” How do we do that? We must ask specifically that God would grant us focus in these evil days.

Conclusion

The Lord’s statement, “By this all men will know that you are My disciples” reveals the effect of believers’ having **love for one another**: the world will know that we belong to Him.

The church may be orthodox in its doctrine and vigorous in its proclamation of the truth, but that will not persuade unbelievers unless believers love each other.¹⁵

Are You All In?

I can remember my son William one time fell into the water at a very young age and had a bad experience. He never wanted to trust anyone in the water. I worked with him every vacation we had to trust me. I would carry him around the pool as a little guy. I would go only to the shallow end. Finally I got Him to trust me to jump into the deep end! He was ALL IN!

Are you all in with the Lord? Do you trust Him in the "deep end" of the Christian life? Are you maturing in your love for the brothers and sisters in your forever family? Are you growing and changing in Christ?

¹⁵ MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (2008). *John 12–21* (p. 91). Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers.