

Love in Action
1 Thessalonians 4:9-12
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At this time, I'd like to invite our children ages 4 to 1st grade to be excused to their time of children's church as they go and learn of what it is to worship the Lord together. We will pray that the Lord would use His word and those who seek to train them in our children's ministry to prepare them for what it is to worship Him together.

We come again this morning to the letter of 1 Thessalonians. This morning, we turn to the next set of verses, verses 9-12. Last week we looked at the practical turn that Paul takes in what it means to live out the gospel together as a community, and specifically, how it affects our ethics. Last week, we looked together on its impact on how we view our sexual ethics. This week, he's looking at something also very personal and very practical, the nature of our work and what that looks like in our community together. How does the gospel change the way we relate to one another in personal relationships? And what does that look like specifically with regard to our labor?

And so, before we turn there, let's turn together to the Lord and ask that he would bless our time together in the word, but also our children as they go to their time of children's church. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you this morning and we thank you for those who are youngest in our midst. We ask, Lord, as they go together to learn to worship together with other young children, as they are trained in what it means to be in the word responding to you, we ask, Lord, that they would become the men and women of God you desire them to be. And for those children who are here with us, Lord, we ask for all of these children who are the next generation that you would enable us to pass on the faith not just by what we teach, but by our love in action that they would be shaped and followers of Jesus Christ because of what they have seen in the body of Christ here at CPC. We now ask, Lord, that you would take your word and that you would encourage us, equip us, and call us to what it means to be those who are called into action and to love in our work and to love one another. How does this change our relationships with each other? Lord, give us wisdom. But most of all, may we reflect your glory and grace. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.

So, not only does Paul give us the practical elements of what it looks like for the gospel to be at work, I want to remind you of where we ended last week because it has continued application for what Paul is now teaching in this set of verses. It begins in verse 8 – before I read this morning's passage. "Therefore, whoever disregards this disregards not man, but God." And then he says you can't disregard God because He is the one who has given to you His Holy Spirit. And that is Paul giving us, in very short words, part of his theology of the Holy Spirit. His theology of the Holy Spirit isn't just that this spirit is an impersonal force, but it is the person – the third person – of the Godhead given the name Holy Spirit, or Holy Ghost. His name has within it what is our goal, as we looked at last week, to be a people who are called to holiness who are shaped in the holiness of who Jesus is, united to Him, because He has given us the Holy Spirit.

It is the teaching of John in his letter when he writes and reflects the words of Jesus when Jesus says in John 7, "I will be with you a little longer, but rather when I leave you I will give you the Holy Spirit. If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." Now this he said about the spirit whom those who believed in him were to receive for as yet the spirit had not been glorified. And so, Jesus – after he was resurrected and as he was going to be with the Lord – He says to His disciples, wait here for the Holy Spirit will come to you and will be poured out in you. And this will be the teaching of the apostles and is the teaching of the gospels and is the teaching of an enormous amount of space in Paul's letters, that the Holy Spirit is a gift of God through Christ proceeding from the Father and the Son and is given to those who believe in

Christ and we received the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit, when He comes into us, becomes the source of living water. And it is not just one of power but also love and grace.

And so, we live our lives together empowered by the Spirit. We walk and become more like Christ through the power of the Spirit. And as we seek to love one another, it is evidence of the work of the Spirit. Because we love not in our own strength, we love because of the One who has loved us. That is, in short summary, what Paul means when he says, “It is he who gives you his Holy Spirit.” And then he begins in verse 9, this morning’s passage,

Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

In your bulletin, you will note that as we look at this passage together, we will see what Paul is teaching here is first “Love that is taught by God,” verses 9-10. And then “Love in action,” verse 11A and B. And then “Love shaped life,” and that is the end of 11-12. Love taught by God, love in action, and love shaped life.

Love taught by God. He tells us here in this passage, “concerning brotherly love,” I have no need to write to any of you. And yet, he seeks to do it anyway. He says, “for you yourselves” are the God-taught ones. He’s saying that you are those who have been taught by the Lord Himself – that is God the Father – to love one another. To understand why he would call them the God-taught ones, it’s important to note he’s not here referring to Jesus’s teaching with regard to loving. It’s not even in some ways even a reference to his other teaching as he does in 1 Corinthians on the nature of love. Rather, he’s saying something specific that gives us a window into, perhaps, his audience, a little bit of sociological background.

When he says, you are the God-taught ones, as some historians have uncovered is that largely what he’s talking about is that these were likely Gentile-Christians who were also known as God-fearing Gentiles, meaning they were at least acquainted with the teaching that would’ve taken place in a synagogue. And as such, they would have understood some of the elementary teachings of what it means to be those who are taught by God with regard to love because we know that Jesus in His teaching, He says that you are to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength” and to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

So, here, love for God is a response to a God who is loving and as such that has direct implications for your neighbor horizontally, of what it looks like to be in human relationships and to love one another. So, when he says, you are the God-taught ones, it’s not just a unique phrase that he brings up out of nowhere. It is likely telling us that those who he was teaching were familiar with the Old Testament. And so, what we have here is that Paul is teaching them in this the nature of who they are before God.

What do I mean by this? In some sense, it could be argued that Paul is laying out here very early on an idea of personalism. What do I mean by personalism? Personalism is a Christian philosophical position that teaches something quite different than individualism. Personalism is saying that each of us as people have been created in the image of God. And as such, we are not just nameless, faceless human material of biological origin, but rather that we are each created in the image of God generally. But specifically, each and every one of us is uniquely you and not just an example of humanity but as such, each of us bears individually an image of God. And we view one another not just as other individuals but rather also those

who are not just humans, but you are persons of intrinsic value because you are you created in the image of God.

Personalism is always quite different than an individualism. Individualism tends to stress a self-dependency based on human rights. But rather personalism teaches that each of us has a personal commitment in the choices that we make and those choices are often made in solidarity with others, meaning we have not only responsibility for ourselves, we have a co-responsibility in how we live out our lives in relationship to others. It is not a sterile individualism where all we do is focus on me, myself, and I, but rather a co-responsibility along with others.

Here, Paul is teaching that we live out this love which has been taught to us by God. We have a unique sense of who we are. We love others as ourselves. We know who we are, why we've been created as individual persons, and we live that out in seeking to recognize that in others. And we love others as we know and love ourselves. And in so doing, he's telling us that this community as those who have been taught by God to love one another, have been a community that are taught by God and shaped by God, a community that is shaped by love itself. And he tells them, verse 10, "for that is what you are doing for all the brothers throughout Macedonia." He's commending them. He's saying, you are recognizing the other. Now, I urge you, do it more and more.

The question is, if they're already doing it, then why is he talking about it? If they're seeking to apply the gospel in such a way they recognize they've been loved by God and they seek to love one another, why is he even bringing it up? It is because of what we learn next. And it is the problem of what some have translated as a disruptive idol group that has grown up, or at least still in their midst as a community. We learn of this in verse 11 as he turns from a love that is taught by God to now, he's showing us what this love looks like in action. Verse 11 states, and I encourage you to aspire or – if you will – to be ambitious to live a quiet life and to mind your own affairs.

So, this love in action causes us to at least consider what he might be referring to here, that he refers to even more explicitly as the letter goes on. You see, the problem here is a group of folks, where it is translated "disruptive idol," it is from a Greek word which means they were playing truant. It's different than "lazy." It's that they had become loafers. Meaning, they were dependent on others in unhealthy ways. And so in what ways is he calling this dependence on others? Well, he does so in two ways in verse 11. After he says something that is quite unusually paired together, he says two things: be ambitious to lead a quiet life. That's an odd combination. Give yourself to leading a quiet life.

And then he explains what this quiet life looks like. First, mind your own affairs. What is he referring to there? Let me give it a stab, if you will. Those who were called to lead this quiet life, he's actually calling them to be ambitious about self-reflection. To lead a quiet life, it's basically saying, what is going on with you? That is about which you should give first priority. Don't live an unexamined life but seek to be ambitious about understanding what God is doing in you in this particular circumstance in part of your life, what's going on in your relational life. That is what you ought to give attention to and to be careful not to be a busy body about what's going on in other people's lives.

This has particular application for us as a people, does it not, in the age of social media. In some sense, I believe what he's telling us here is to be ambitious about leading a self-reflective life and avoiding in-meshed relationships. What do I mean by that? The idea of being a busy body means we are far too wound up and oftentimes far too involved with the intricacies of other people's lives emotionally and relationally. And this can infect the church. And it's not just what's being shared in social media. What do I mean by in-meshed relationships? It usually looks something like this. It involves a lack of independence and autonomy. Relationships can grow too close for comfort. For instance, someone who can be in an in-meshed relationship may be unable to balance being supportive of the other person in what they want, but oftentimes we can begin to have our expectations on what other people should be doing. Or we can have our relationships and emotions so close that they become like a symbiotic relationship, that we are upset because someone else is upset to such a degree we lose any sense of independence of our own

emotions and we're not able to speak clearly in giving advice or care to another person because we're so wrapped up in what's going on in their lives.

It also is an inability to set appropriate boundaries as to what we ought to be sharing with each other and it begins to put a level of responsibility on those relationships that when we begin to share it, we're not even sure and assured that the other person is going to keep them quiet. I know this as a pastor because I've seen it happen in my own life. But I've seen it happen in the church where you share something with someone in hopes that it's a safe place, and then before the relationship can actually sustain that level of sharing in intimacy, we find out that that person who also doesn't have good boundaries begins to share it with four or five other people. And then they call the pastor and they say, you know, I heard so-and-so is going through X. And that is a very difficult world to operate. How did you find that information out? And you're giving me your spin on it because now it's third- or fourth-person distance from the original action. And now I have the burden of knowing this thing and I don't even know what to do with it. I wasn't involved in the conversation, I don't know all the roots of what's going on in that person's life, why this is happening, and suddenly we become in-meshed.

Please understand I absolutely believe we need to be sharing one another's burdens. But it doesn't mean we do so without boundaries. Sometimes, we're so starved for relationship, we scarcely begin to reflect, can this particular relationship sustain this level of sharing? Is this even a healthy person that I should be sharing with even if I might perceive that they're healthy? Are they the one I should be sharing it with, or should I be sharing it with the very person that is involved in my problem? And then these kinds of things get shared on social media as well. I don't know what to do with that as a pastor. And I have a feeling I'm not alone. Can I come up and talk to you about that thing? If I don't like it or if I don't respond to it on social media, does that mean I don't care? These are all kinds of things where we're sharing oftentimes, and we unwittingly become busy bodies. We become way too aware, and oftentimes, too unaware of what's really going on in another person's life. And we begin to project onto that stuff our own expectations, how we would respond if we were in their shoes. But I'm not them, how can I know what is right?

So, he's calling us, this love in action is to be mindful and self-reflective about what's happening with you first. Not being overly interested, not uncaring, but overly interested in what's happening in the lives of others. And maybe what we need to commit ourselves to is to sometime stop someone or to stop ourselves and go, wait a second, is this a healthy conversation that I should be having? Is this something I should be praying more about? Is this something I need to find one person or maybe that person I should be talking to, does this person need to know this? Or if we're the hearer, we need to obviously stop: I know you're having an issue with this other person, have you talked with that person about this? Do they know that you have a problem with them in this area? If they don't, I want to be very careful about the level of details you're sharing with me.

Two things are happening in that. It's not that we're unloving. It's that I'm becoming self-aware as to what I can handle and what I can speak into. And I want you to be lovingly self-aware of what it is that is appropriate to share so that we don't get involved in triangulated relationships. Instead of sharing with this person that I should be talking to, I want to share with that person. And then we're just in this unhealthy situation.

I don't mean to get overly involved, here, with regard to pastoral counseling and human relationships. But we as the church are also known as a group of people who are awfully judgmental towards one another. Why is that so? Why is it so that sometimes I've heard Christians say, the last person I would ever share something that is deeply going on in my life is another Christian? Why is that? I know they do because they've told me. And here's the secret, I have felt it. Other pastors tell other pastors, the last thing you should ever do is share something that's going on in your life because people don't know how to handle it. This is because, I think, that boundaries have been improperly drawn and we unintentionally become busy bodies in what's happening in other people's lives.

And so, he's saying that love and action begins by first understanding, what is happening in mine? And what is a healthy way of relationally dealing with it? What do proper boundaries, relationally, look like? And so, he says, be careful but be ambitious about leading a quiet life.

But then he says not only just a quiet life and minding your own affairs, but also "to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one." Now, when I was thinking about this passage and reading through it, I couldn't help but think of this. "We dig, we dig, dig, dig in a mine the whole day through to dig, dig, dig, dig, dig, dig, dig is what we like to do. It ain't no trick to get rich quick if you dig, dig, dig with a shovel or a pick in a mine, in a mine where a million diamonds shine. We dig, dig, dig early morn to night, up everything in sight. Yes, we work, we work, hi-ho, hi-ho, hi-ho. It's off to work we go."

He's actually suggesting, he's actually teaching that working is an extension of love. That love ought to shape our work life and our attitude towards work because that's what's at issue here. The issue is, there was an attitude among this group of people who had become overly busy body, had also continued to live out what was common in Greek culture. So, there are two things that are happening during this time sociologically. First, there was a general Greek disdain for manual labor. And secondly, there is also within this group an over-realized eschatology. What do I mean? What I mean is there was a group of people for whom they felt that Jesus was so imminent for His return, why bother working at all? What I'm going to do is we're going to live in community, we're going to lean on one another, and we're just going to wait this thing out until He comes again – wedded also with a disdain attitude towards manual labor. And so, he says to them, work with your own hands.

What is he telling us? He's saying that work is a form of love meaning that our attitude towards work is not a critique whatsoever with those who become unemployed or who need to receive gifts and support from others. Rather it is a critique of avoidance of work and the use of one's gifts, it is an unhealthy dependence on others. So, he's saying a form of love is that we use the skills that we have been given, and that is, work has an intrinsic value in and of itself that prior to the fall, work was still being done in cultivating the garden. Work is not a consequence of the fall. So, work has intrinsic value. We ought to work hard, and as we do, we not only provide for ourselves and our family, we're also stand-ready to help support those who are really in need.

And so, here his critique for them is, remember to work hard because work is a form of love. And as a co-responsible person within this group of professing Christians, note that the work you've been given is a gift even if it is manual labor. And so, he says to them that this attitude towards work of seeing it as intrinsically good is a form of love and be aware that it is a call against an unhealthy dependence because within this culture – and even some would suggest the very year in which this letter would have been written – it was a year of famine. And so, there was a large number of folks who had great wealth, who had a long list of benefactors. And so, what it was encouraging is instead of the use of hard work with their hands, they just began to live off the largess of others.

This is not a comment, as I said, on unemployment or the need to support those who are without work or who would find themselves in need of financial support. It is specifically a critique at a situation which arose which was causing those, instead of using the gifts that God has given them, they were simply dependent on others. He's not saying as a general principle that we should never depend on others, because that would make no sense to the rest of the Pauline letters. Of course we're dependent on one another for love and for prayer. But it doesn't mean that the goods of others become our ticket to not working.

But it's also something else intrinsically in it. It's a critique of this over-realized eschatology. And Paul did believe that Jesus was about to return, and so did many in the early church. This is a counsel. It doesn't matter if Jesus is coming back this afternoon, get to work because the work that God has given you is a gift from His hand. And I believe it is connected to Paul's eschatology, in fact, the eschatology of the gospel that when Jesus Christ returns, He will restore all things. And so, if you do and work towards

that which is good in this life, it will have impact in the next one. That to plant a garden and to cultivate it and to use the gifts that you have been given is a garden which will have ripple effects in history.

This is talking about work as being a good thing. Perhaps it is part of the roots of the Protestant work ethic, maybe. But it is also saying that work in and of itself is a form of love. But he also tells us here that work is also a mission. When he says in the final part of 12, “so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one,” it is recognizing that our work, the skills and talents that we have been given, is a demonstration that God has given us that gift. And doing so with hard work and with excellence becomes a testimony of who God is and of His goodness and of His grace as anything else.

Because work has intrinsic value, it’s not an end in and of itself nor is it merely, I’m doing this work so I can use it as a platform to share the gospel – which is oftentimes how Christians think about work. Even as we think about using work and working in other parts of the world, I’m going to go work in another part of the world so that I can merely share the gospel. I’m not saying that’s inherently bad, I’m just saying it’s not the whole story. That the work itself is beautiful whether it be an engineer or a teacher or a parent, whether it be philosophy, whether it be punching code into a computer, it matters just as digging a whole in the ground to be paid can be done with excellence, preparation, hard work, and respect.

Because as we work our way this way as a form of love, when someone asks us, why do you do this work? Well, I love it. Or, I don’t particularly love it but it’s the gift that I’ve been given. Well what do you mean by that? Well, it’s because I’m a Christian and I believe that the talents and work that I’ve been given whether I particularly love it or not, it’s the work my heavenly Father has given me, and I want to do it to the best of my ability so that I can provide for myself and my family. That’s why I work. I’m not just working for the weekend. I’m working because that’s what I’ve been made to do.

This is a love-shaped life. Paul cares not only for our sexual ethics, but our relational ethics, our work ethic, because it is all a gift from His hand. And as a people who have been equipped with a lot of great gifts. Some of you do work that you’ve told me makes your brain fall asleep. Others of you tell me you passionately get up in the morning and you go to do that work. And it is wearisome. Our work is wearisome. Now, that is the consequence of the fall but not the work itself. This is God’s gift because He has taught us to love. Love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and all of our gifts, and to love one another as we love ourselves. To be mindful that we are not unwittingly getting involved with a life of busy body, knowing in unhealthy ways what is happening in other people’s lives, and to have a view towards work that it is a gift and we do so for His glory.

This is love in action. And as an advent people as we wait for Christ to return, may the Lord bless and make fruitful the work of your hands. May he also make us a people in relationship with each other that are appropriately self-reflective with proper boundaries loving one another, supporting one another, encouraging one another, sharpening one another as iron sharpens iron, not for our glory but for His glory alone. And the only way it can be done is for the fruit of the Spirit. God-enabled, Spirit-empowered, that the river of life, strains of living water, might come in us but also through us and bless others. Let’s pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you that you call us even in the mundane parts of our lives to be shaped by the gospel. Help us to glorify your name that our love for you might grow in action towards others and the work you have given us to do. To your name be glory forever and ever. Amen.