

May 6, 2001 by Steve Brandon



Excel in Holiness - Love and Discipline

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

1. Love for the brethren (verses 9-10)

2. Discipline for your life (verses 11-12)

This past week, I attended a preaching workshop at College Church in Wheaton on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. College Church is where Kent Hughes is a pastor, right next door to Wheaton College. They have this conference every year, in which they gather pastors from all around the United States. There were about 90 pastors in attendance of this workshop. The goal of the workshop is to encourage pastors to preach the Bible Expositionally, that is, exposing the meaning of the text of Scripture as it was originally heard and expounding upon the implications of the text for us today. It was quite an encouragement to my own soul and I very much look forward to returning there again next year. I would like to share with you tonight, by way of introduction to our text this evening, an illustration which was given at the conference by the main speaker, David Jackman, from England.

He said that there are many different ways in which the Bible can be treated.

1. Placing the preacher in front of the Bible. In this instance, prominence is placed on the preacher (as if the preacher's face is in front of the Bible, hiding it) -- his personality, his giftedness, his eloquence, etc., that he becomes prominent and the Bible is almost completely hidden from the people.

- The Bible occasionally sticks out from behind the man's ears, but really, it is hidden.
- The listeners hear the **preacher**, not the Bible.

2. Placing the Bible in front of the preacher. In this case, prominence is given to the scripture (as if the Bible is in front of the preacher's face that the preacher is hidden) -- the truth comes out, but it comes out dry and sterile. This might be labeled the Jonathan Edwards approach.

- You occasionally see the preacher, but his voice is muffled and the scriptures are not explained.
- The listeners hear the **Bible**, not the preacher.

3. Placing the Bible next to the preacher, who points to (and explains) the Bible. This is obviously, the best way. Both the Bible and the preacher to be visible to all (as if the Bible is set before the people) -- the preacher, in this case, ought to come across, not as one who is taking authority from the Bible, but as one who is pointing to and explaining the Bible to his listeners.

- In this instance, the listeners hear the **Bible explained by the preacher**.
- You remember when Philip encountered the Ethiopian Eunuch, it was the Eunuch who said, "How can I understand unless someone guides me?" (Acts 8:31).

That is my desire, in my ministry to you all is to be one who simply guides you along the way of Bible understanding. May you always see me as one who is pointing a finger to our Bibles and saying, "Thus saith the LORD! Do you see? Here it is!"

Ultimately, it is my great desire that the Word of God would become the center and focus of all of our activities here in Rockford. We each need to be saying this to one another, "Do you see it? Here it is! Isn't it glorious?" But not only to each other, but also to those in the world, who are lost in their sin. They need to hear the words which God has spoken. We need to speak forth what God has said and we need to make people deal with their Bibles and the truth contained therein!

So, open your Bibles to 1 Thessalonians, chapter 4. We will focus our attention upon verses 9-12 tonight. May God help me to explain these verses to you.

In these verses, Paul is dealing with the issue of the sanctification of the believers in Thessalonica. We have entitled this section (from verse 1 through 12), "Excel in Holiness." We have picked up this title from two different verses. Paul writes in verse 3, "This is the will of God, your sanctification." Sanctification is simply another form of the word, "Holiness." Paul writes in verse 1 and 10, "that you may excel still more" and "we urge you ... to excel still more." Thus, our title this evening, "Excel in Holiness."

In our last two sessions in 1 Thessalonians, we have looked at the area of Sexual Purity. Paul writes, "This is the will of God, your sanctification: that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality." I have sought to press home to you the importance of sexual purity in an age where sexual freedom is the cry of the culture. Just like Thessalonica, we live today in a sex-crazed culture that wants to have its sexual freedom - when they want it, where they want it, with whomever they want -- and all without consequences. And Paul says, "abstain from it!!" "Stay away from it!!" The Biblical direction is complete abstinence. May God, in His mercy deliver us from it!

Tonight, we begin a new section of Paul's admonition. Paul clearly marks this out when he says, (in verse 9), "Now as to the love of the brethren." This is clearly a signpost. As there are signs which welcome you to cities, Paul is introducing the readers to a new topic. In effect, he says, "Now let me talk to you about this....." In one sense, he is going to change the subject (away from sexual purity toward love and discipline). In another, he is still going to be concerning himself with issues of their sanctification.

This is similar to what Paul did in 1 Corinthians. You remember how Paul often said in that epistle, ...

"Now concerning the things about which you wrote, ..." (7:1)

"Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, ..." (8:1)

"Now concerning the spirituals, ..." (12:1)

"Now concerning the collection for the saints" (16:1)

Paul uses the exact same phrasing here in this text. He says, "Now, as to the love of the brethren..." (4:9). Other changes in topic will be found in the following verses,

4:13, "but we don't want you to be uninformed, brethren, ..."

5:1, "now as to the times and epochs, brethren, ..."

5:12, "but we request of you, brethren, ..."

5:23, "now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; ..."

In 1 Corinthians, these sorts of signposts were used to respond to a letter which those in Corinth had written him. In this case, it is Timothy's report concerning the Thessalonians which caused Paul to take up each of these topics.

In this section from verses 9-12, Paul brings up two timely issues of personal conduct for the Thessalonians to hear. The first issue is the issue of love.

1. Love for the brethren (verses 9-10)

Paul writes, "Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for yourselves are taught by God to love one another; for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more" (verses 9-10).

Obviously, in these two verses, Paul's main concern for the Thessalonians is their love. On the one hand, he says that the Thessalonians don't need to be told to love one another. Yet, on the other hand, he tells them "to excel still more."

I think of any admonition, this is **perfectly** suited to the people of Rock Valley Bible Church. Let me simply ask you, "Do the people of Rock Valley Bible Church love one another?" You would be silly to say anything other than "Yes." Do birds fly? Do fish swim? Of course the people of Rock Valley Bible Church love each other.

I can commend you on several things...

1. What stands out most in my mind, obviously, is your love and care for us last weekend with you work for us on our house in preparation to come up here to Rockford. I said in church last Sunday that we were overwhelmed with the love of God's people.
2. I think of an email addressed to the church from one of us was simply addressed to our "family." In many ways, we are a family and we should think of ourselves as a family. But this sort of language and talk simply flows from our attitude toward one another.
3. I think of the picnic we had last Sunday evening. People were off simply enjoying the company of others. Whether throwing Frisbee or playing basketball or sitting and chatting, or (as was SR's favorite thing to do) was throwing rocks into the river. A sign of love is a sign of longing to be with one another.

These things were simply in the last week in the life of our church! We could go back to other events. Whether it be helping out those who have born children recently, or have gone through surgery, and have needed meals. Our church has been there to help. The list of examples could go on and on..... Rightly so it should.

And as much as I simply listed some of the things that you all have done, which have confirmed your love for one another, I am sure that Paul did much the same thing. I mean, that it would be impossible for Paul to say, "as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another" (verse 9) if he didn't have some specific examples of how they demonstrated their love toward one another.

He could have done the same thing that I did here. Timothy probably told him of many examples of their love for one another. Timothy would have experienced their love for one another first-hand and would have communicated it to Paul. Timothy would have had actual hard-core evidence -- names and events which demonstrated their love for one another.

But note the **extent** of their love. Not only does it say that they had a love for one another, but Paul extended their love to include "all the brethren who are in all Macedonia." (verse 10). If you recall, Macedonia is the geographic region to the north of Thessalonica. It isn't a city, but it is a region. Thessalonica, itself, if you remember, was the chief seaport in the region of Macedonia. Paul said that their love was known

by the brethren, not only in Thessalonica itself, but also in the entire Roman providence beyond.

This then gives us some insight into exactly why those in Macedonia and Achaia heard of what God had done in the lives of those in Thessalonica. "For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, [that is] Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thessalonians 1:8-10).

When we were in chapter 1, we found out that the word had sounded forth from them into Macedonia (north) and Achaia (south) (where Paul wrote this letter from - Corinth). Here is probably an instance of how the word traveled. Somehow, somehow, those believers in Thessalonica demonstrated their love to those in Macedonia. Those who were the recipients of their love continued to speak with others, who spoke with others, who spoke with others. They told of how the Thessalonians "turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God" (1:9). And how did they serve the true God? Through loving others! Through following the two greatest commands, "Love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself."

We know in those days, there were no hotels. Friends stayed with friends. Perhaps they were hospitable to travelling Macedonians. Perhaps there was some crisis in which those in Thessalonica expressed their love to those people, somehow (financially, with physical help, help during persecution, ...) At any rate, their love toward the brethren was known throughout an extensive geographic region.

For us in Rockford, it would be like Northern Illinois knowing about our love for one another. Macedonia was several hundreds of miles in length and about a hundred miles in breadth -- Pretty close to what Northern Illinois is like: from Chicago to Galena, from Rockford to LaSalle Peru.

Could you imagine having such a reputation? It almost seems unfathomable. I have no idea how our love for the brethren could extend this far. Perhaps through like-minded churches in surrounding towns....

But such was the tremendous love of the Thessalonians. Such ought to be our love as well. My question upon the text is quite naturally, so how did they get this ability to love so greatly? The answer is quite simple, really.

Look at verse 9, "They were **taught by God** how to love one another." They were taught by God and they learned it from God. Paul knew that they learned it because they had practiced it. It wasn't merely that they knew the truth of loving others, it was that they actually practiced their love. You demonstrate your true learning through your actions. If you don't flush it out in your life, you show you haven't learned it. These Thessalonians were simply "doers of the word." You remember how James says, "Prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves." (James 1:22).

They were taught the word and they obeyed the word. (or, to use Paul's terminology, they "practiced" their love toward all the brethren). Paul didn't need to write to them with letter, because it was true in their lives.

Let's get back to this question of being "taught by God how to love one another." What exactly does this mean? Did God descend upon them and personally teach them through private revelation? We don't have such a record of God doing so.

I believe that the best way to understand this is that their love was a divine love. It transcended mere human love. There is a love which is natural.

You remember when Jesus said, "if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" (Matt. 6:46-47). These words of Jesus affirms that there is a natural love which isn't taught of God. This is the morality of the world!

Do you ever wonder why non-believers exhibit great love toward others at times? It is simply for this reason: It is to their benefit to do so. To be hostile toward all would leave you against all. But to love some will give you an advantage in this world at times, especially when they find themselves in need. But Jesus says that the one who is taught of God loves differently, "I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 6:44).

This is the sense of the love of the Thessalonians. It was so unnatural, that it must have had divine origin. There was no other way to explain it, but to say that God taught it. It was a supernatural, rather than a natural love. I ran across the following true story run by the Associated Press a few years ago which demonstrates that illustrates this greatly

MIAMI - After more than two decades, an elderly man in a nursing home has confessed to kidnapping a boy who was found shot in the head and left for dead in the Everglades. But instead of bitterness toward the man he blames for putting a bullet through his skull and leaving him blinded in one eye, now-32-year-old Chris Carrier visits his kidnapper every day to read him the Bible. And the two have forged an unlikely friendship. "Nobody would imagine that I would shake the hand that tried to kill me," Carrier told The Miami Herald in a story published Thursday. "When I look at him, I don't stare at my abductor and potential murderer. I stare at a man, very old, very alone and scared,"

David McAllister, now 77 and blind, won't be charged in the case, though. The statute of limitations ran out years ago. On Dec. 20, 1974, Carrier, then 10, stepped off his school bus and simply vanished. Six days later, a hunter found him 75 miles from home sitting on a rock in the Everglades, dazed and bruised. Someone had poked him with an ice pick, burned with cigarettes, then shot him. The bullet had entered Carrier's right temple and exited his left. Today, his left eye barely opens. McAllister, an ex-convict, was the prime suspect. He was a nurse who had tended to Carrier's elderly uncle prior to the abduction and had been fired for drinking. McAllister strongly resembled the composite drawing of Carrier's assailant.

However, no physical evidence linked him to the crime.

The case came alive again in August, when Coral Gables police Maj. Charles Scherer, originally assigned to the abduction in 1975, learned McAllister was in a North Miami Beach nursing home. Scherer interviewed McAllister three times since Aug. 30. Last week, he confessed on tape to the kidnapping, but not the shooting. "He fit the composite to a T. I am sure of it now, and I was sure of it then," Scherer said.

Carrier's mother, Norma, also was convinced McAllister was her son's assailant all along. She told The Associated Press on Thursday that she finds forgiveness "very, very hard, but I'm glad that it's finished." Carrier said he is happy he has been able to show McAllister that, except for his eye, he was not permanently scarred. He married, has two children, graduated from a seminary and served as director of youth ministries at a church. He plans to move to Waco, Texas, next week to open a Christian bookstore.

McAllister has apologized to Carrier in their meetings. For the victim, the past is past. "He's never been able to live without memories and pain," Carrier said. "In that perspective, he has paid his price, served his time."

This is the kind of love that will extend our reputation to Northern Illinois. The church in Thessalonica had a love that had a great reputation. And what did Paul admonish? "We urge you, brethren, to excel still more" (verse 10).

And so, I admonish you, church family, will your love for one another excel? As great as it is, it hasn't extended throughout Northern Illinois. May God grant this sort of love to each of us. I pray with Paul, "May the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all men" (3:12).

There will come a day when you come into conflict with somebody in this congregation. Yes, in this congregation! I'm not speaking theoretically here. I am speaking truth. It will happen. I ask you today, in your right mind, "Will your love for that person be evident?"

If so, you are taught of God to love. If not, you will need to examine your own heart and have the need to be taught of God. "May the Lord cause **us** to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all men,"

Well, I have some **good news** for you. This desire of Paul's was realized. Turn over to 2 Thess. 1:3. "We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brethren, as is only fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged, and the love of each one of you toward one another grows ever greater" (2 Thess. 1:3). They excelled in their love for one another. Paul's prayer was answered. The Lord caused them to increase and abound in love for one another.

But as good as this news is, so also I have some **bad news** also. As well as the Thessalonians did concerning their response to the first issue of personal conduct which Paul brought to their attention, they did equally as bad with respect to the second issue.

You recall that the first issue was ...

1. Love for the brethren (verses 9-10)

The second issue was

2. Discipline for your life (verses 11-12)

This is a good reminder to us that as good a church as the church of the Thessalonians was, it did have flaws.

Paul writes, "and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you; so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need" (verses 11-12).

Paul gave 3 admonitions in these verses which may be summarized by the word, "discipline." (You will see later, why I chose to outline this with the word "discipline," though it isn't even in this text).

1. "to lead a quiet life."

This doesn't mean that we need to live a life that is regulated by the decibel meter and that we need to live with very little sound around us. We aren't supposed to whisper to one another in silence. But rather, this implies a life that is peaceful, not turbulent. It implies a life that avoids unnecessary contention.

2. "to attend to your own business."

Paul is telling them (and us), "mind your own business." Be engaged with their own duties, and don't be concerned with that of others." This is opposite to being a busybody, who merely goes around from house to house, gossiping and neglecting the things that ought to be done.

3. "to work with your hands."

Here, Paul is simply instructing them to earn their own living and to follow their own earthly callings."

One commentator summed all of these admonitions by saying that the Thessalonians were guilty of (1) restlessness, (2) meddlesomeness, and (3) idleness.

As I have reminded you before, any admonition in Scripture is there because it had particular relevance at the time in which the command

was written. Certainly these people in Thessalonica weren't doing these things. They were guilty of (1) restlessness, so they needed "to lead a quiet (i.e. peaceful) life." They were guilty of (2) meddlingness, so they needed "to attend to their own business." They were guilty of (3) idleness, so they needed "to work with their hands."

I believe that the Thessalonians probably struggled with this, because this was so much **ingrained into their culture**. Practically all of the commentaries I read mentioned how the Greek culture looked down on manual labor. When they became Christians, they were called to adopt the work ethic of the Bible, which lifts up and exalts work -- any work is honoring to God. But in the culture of Thessalonica, you see lazy, idle people, who didn't want to work with their hands, but rather who spent much of their days meddling in the affairs of others, which produced contention between each other.

As I thought about trying to understand what these people were like, I was drawn to think about our opportunity one year when we vacationed in Tahiti. We were told by a tour guide that the Tahitians suffer from an illness called, "the fui" (pronounced like "few"). He described that when a Tahitian is confronted by something that needs to be done, he often says, "fui" and refuses to do the work.

Paul knew that it would be a struggle for them. While he was in Thessalonica, he told them this. Verse 11 says, "just as we commanded you." Before writing this epistle he had already warned them of their upcoming difficulties they would face with respect to this.

But they still, just didn't get it. Turn over to 2 Thess. 3. I will start reading in verse 6, with comment along the way.

"Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us" (**2 Thess. 3:6**).

Here, Paul is telling the Thessalonians to withdraw, to keep away from, to avoid any brother who leads an undisciplined life. The word for unruly used in this passage is the same one used in verse 7 and 11, which is translated in the NAS as "**undisciplined**." The KJV/NKJV translates it, "disorderly." (Which, by the way, is why I titled this issue one of discipline, because this word is used to summarize all of the bad activity which Paul was denouncing.)

He then speaks about his own example while among them.

"For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we [kept] working night and day so that we might not be a burden to any of you; not because we do not have the right [to this,] but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, that you might follow our example" (**2 Thess. 3:7-9**).

It is interesting to note that one of Paul's driving reasons for working hard to be an example for others as to what it means to work hard. I can tell you, church family, by God's grace, that will be my example as well. I want to model for you all what hard work looks like.

"For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone will not work, neither let him eat" (**2 Thess. 3:10**).

Paul is next going to address the exact issues that he warned against in 1 Thessalonians (but in reverse order).

"For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all [i.e. idleness - #3], but acting like busybodies [i.e. meddling - #2]. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion [i.e. restlessness - #1] and eat their own bread" (**2 Thess. 3:11-12**).

Amazing! He told them in person before he wrote his first epistle. He wrote to them in 1 Thessalonians to tell them. He writes the same thing here in 2 Thessalonians.

(As a footnote here, I would like to interject here that nearly every commentary I read at this point says something like this, "these Thessalonian believers were so convinced of the soon return of Christ, that they abandoned their work to sit around and await His return. They needed to be reminded that we ought to continue to work as we wait for his coming. May I say that there is not a single shred of evidence for this? Though it may be true, in these epistles, Paul doesn't give any clue of this cause and effect relationship. Perhaps it is some sort of tradition that many have held to over the years that becomes finalized into standard interpretation with no evidence).

Whatever the cause, idleness and meddling were major problems for the Thessalonians. Major problems needed major reactions. So Paul continued, ...

"But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good. And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that man and do not associate with him, so that he may be put to shame. And [yet] do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother" (**2 Thes. 3:13-15**).

A Christian life is an orderly, hard working life. We need to admonish those in our midst who don't work hard, but choose to spend their time in meddling in the business and affairs of others. Paul says not to associate with him, so that he may be put to shame (not as an enemy, but as a brother).

You might say, Paul, that's pretty harsh. Why would you say that? (Turn back to 1 Thessalonians). We have a two-fold purpose statement in 4:12, "so that you may (1) behave properly toward outsiders and (2) not be in any need."

Why would Paul say not to associate with such a person?

1. Because the reputation of the church is at stake.

Verse 12, "that you may behave properly (i.e. becomingly, attractively) toward outsiders (i.e. unbelievers)."

Those who go about living undisciplined lives and expecting a hand-out shame the body of Christ and prove its testimony to the world as null and void. It's about evangelism. It's about demonstrating before the world what the transforming power of Christ does.... It makes us busy and hard-working for the task.

It will make a difference. I see those at work who don't work hard. They bring shame upon themselves. If they were professing Christians, they would shame the church. I remember a friend who was regarded as one who has a strong work ethic, and therefore, must be a Christian.

Note that this isn't describing working at our religion, but working at our vocation. This is because your Christianity pours over into other aspects of your life. Are you idle? Get busy!! Do volunteer work or something. Just get busy.

2. Because of your motivation.

Verse 12, "so that you may not be in any need."

Though we as a church will help the needy, it should be your goal **not** to be needy. Elsewhere, Paul said, "Let him who steals steal no longer; but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who has need." (Eph. 4:28).

Our motivation to work is to give to others. That is why we work and labor. Richard Baxter said it great, when he said that the motivation of our work is "obeying God and doing good to others. ... The public welfare, or the good of the many, is to be valued above our own. Every man therefore is bound to do all the good he can to others, especially for the church and commonwealth." (as quoted by Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, p. 30).

May God grant us mercy to live in such a way as pleases Him. "May the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all men." (1 Thess. 3:12). "May the Lord cause you to work and labor for His kingdom and glory."

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on May 6, 2001 by Steve Brandon.
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