Let us worship our Lord Jesus Christ each and every day!

Well, once again, time has gotten away from me, so I have to just write a short message. I do pray that you are all doing well. I know that so many are going through difficult times. Keep faith in the Lord Jesus. In Christ, we are heading to an eternity where the troubles of this life will seem as nothing. Still, Jesus is a very present help in time of trouble. He cares for us in this life and He is the One who will give us strength and comfort.

In Christ’s love

John

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1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

Paul has moved into an application section of his letter to the church in Thessalonica. He has just finished a section on sexual purity: A necessary part of the Christian’s life and the exact opposite of the general culture in Thessalonica. Both of these points hold true for us today. In these next four verses, Paul speaks of brotherly love and quietly earning one’s living. Two different topics which are actually tied together.

It appears that the church had written to Paul about some questions and concerns they had regarding Christian life and the coming of Christ. Paul begins by responding to an inquiry about brotherly love. It’s important to know that the Greek word used here is “philadelphia” and not the usual Greek word we see in the Bible for love which is “agape”. In the Bible, agape love is equated with the type of love God has for us. We are to have this kind of love for the rest of humanity. Agape is a self-sacrificial love; it is a love that does not depend on anything the person does or is. Agape is given to a person whether they deserve it or not.

Philadelphia is often translated “brotherly love”. In secular Greek, it referred to the love that would naturally occur between siblings. We all know that in this fallen world, love between siblings isn’t always what it should be; but often there is a strong bond between a family of brothers and sisters. In this kind of relationship, it is often siblings who are the first to give help and comfort in times of crisis. Brothers and sisters are ones we can count on just to talk with or enjoy each other’s company.

In the Bible, philadelphia took on another application. Once we become Christians, God adopts us as His children. Since we are all children of God, having the same Father, it falls into place that we are all siblings. Because we are all brothers and sisters, philadelphia should apply. We are called to love all people, but we are called to a special brotherly love for fellow members of the church; both the world-wide church and our local congregation.

Paul lets them know that they are doing exactly what they are supposed to be doing. Their brotherly love is flowing out of their own church and into the other churches in Macedonia. They are practicing philadelphia within their own congregation and to the wider church of Christ.

What an important lesson for us today. How many problems in congregations would never even come up if the people practiced brotherly love? Again, our society interferes with this Christian ideal. The idea of our own rights has taken a place above anything else. The “self” has been made the ultimate reason for everything. As with every other contrivance of satan, these things can infiltrate the church. We must be constantly on our guard against this.

Christians do love themselves; we are a temple of the Holy Spirit. But we also hold others in higher regard than ourselves; which is the result of philadelphia. Brotherly love among a congregation may even let our own rights be violated. This doesn’t mean that there can’t be disagreements; it just means we work them out. It doesn’t mean there can’t be church discipline; sometimes that has to take place. It also doesn’t mean that there won’t be personality clashes; there are some personalities that just don’t naturally get along. It does mean that those with personality clashes have to work a little harder to love each other.

On the back of the church bulletin a couple weeks ago there was a little fable. Nobody got to see it because of the weather that Sunday. But it fits with our subject. It was about a group of porcupines who were dealing with very cold weather. It was so cold that other animals were freezing to death. The porcupines huddled together for warmth, which kept them from freezing. Unfortunately, even though they tried not to, they occasionally jabbed each other. Because of the discomfort, they moved apart. However, once they did that, they started dying from the cold. The porcupines decided that they could put up with the occasional discomfort they caused each other rather than dying so they huddled together again.

Of course, that describes a Christian congregation. We sometimes jab each other; usually by accident. When that happens, we freely give forgiveness and continue loving each other as members of the body of Christ. We do have protection when we are together as a congregation: We can pray for each other, we can counsel each other, we can comfort each other. If we are watching over each other it is harder for satan to infiltrate the church.

Here’s an interesting thing about brotherly love in a congregation: we can’t do it ourselves. We are to try, but in order to be successful requires the Holy Spirit. As Paul said in verse 9, “*you yourselves are taught by God to love one another*”. The Christians of the Thessalonian church were willing to observe what Paul taught them about loving the body of Christ; more importantly, they were willing to be led by the Holy Spirit in this love.

Paul’s statement here is nothing new in the Bible. God revealed that He would teach His people back in Isaiah 54:13, “*All your sons will be taught by the LORD*”. Jesus brought this back up later in John 6:45, “*It is written in the Prophets: ‘And they shall all be taught of God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me*.” God graciously calls sinners to Himself, those who choose to heed that call by accepting Jesus are given the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit then teaches and guides.

We as a church must grasp the importance of philadelphia; it means more than just get along with, it means more than just tolerate; it means a decision to love those Christians around us no matter what. And it is serious. 1 John 3:14, “*We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers and sisters. The one who does not love remains in death*.” Our love for our fellow Christians is the evidence of our salvation. One who remains in death is not saved.

Again, this has to be done through the Holy Spirit. Paul tells us in Romans 5:5, “*the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us*.” And I think we are all familiar with the first fruit of the Holy Spirit given in Galatians 5:22, which is love.

Paul makes it clear that he thinks the Thessalonian church is doing a very good job with loving their fellow Christians. I think this church is doing a good job loving their fellow Christians. But in the same way that Paul encouraged them to excel still more, I ask you to excel still more. Because we are fallen people, we always have room for improvement. Be slow to anger and quick to forgive. Keep each other in prayer.

In verses 11 and 12, Paul writes to them about earning a living. There was apparently some problem in Thessalonica regarding some who gave up working and depended on others for their support. It must have been a deep-rooted problem because Paul mentions it twice in this letter and once in his second letter to this church. There have been several suggestions as to why some of the people didn’t continue earning a living, but the Bible doesn’t actually tell us. In the end, it doesn’t matter.

Some of the folks had stopped working and began living off of the good will of others. These were not people who were unable to work, but people who were able and unwilling. Paul let it be known that this was no way to behave. In fact, he had made this clear when he was in Thessalonica and started the church. He reminds them that he commanded them. That’s a strong word, command. Paul loved them dearly but he used his apostolic authority to give them an order to earn a living.

Specifically, Paul tells them to work with their hands. In the Greek society, those who worked with their hands were looked down upon. It was interesting that the Greeks loved beautiful dyed fabrics and pottery vases and statues; but they despised the artisans who made them. In direct opposition to this position came the Christian view of the dignity of working with one’s hands and manual labor. It is good for us to remember that there is dignity for anyone who is earning their own way, even if they earn it in the most laborious and mundane way.

Work tends to be difficult for us and perhaps something we try to avoid because of the fall. God originally ordained work for man and it was pleasurable. In Genesis 2:15 we read, “*Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and tend it*.” Part of our original purpose at creation was to work and care for the earth. Even now, we can enjoy work and even take a proper pride in accomplishment when we are grateful to God for work and our ability to do it. As far as examples for working jobs with our hands, we have Paul the tentmaker and Jesus the carpenter.

Paul encourages us to live a quiet life; we can fulfill the ministry the Lord gives us much better if we aren’t worried about making a show of our life. Also, if we mind our own business, we won’t be sticking our noses into someone else’s. This has a lot to do with living a respectable life; Earning your own way and being the type of person that someone wouldn’t mind having as a neighbor. We are called to do our best to get along with all people, including nonbelievers. As a Christian, it is inevitable that we will be slandered; just make sure that the slander is a lie or you are being slandered for your Christian faith.

In verse 12, “outsiders” refers to those who are not Christians, they are outside of the family of God. But we still must behave properly toward them; we have no God given right to treat them poorly or somehow think we are better than them. In fact, as Paul mentions here, we are to behave properly toward them. If we provide for our own living, we won’t have to be asking Christians or outsiders for help. We may even be able to help them if they are in need. Remember, ultimately our desire is to bring outsiders into the family of God. Our behavior toward them may be what earns a hearing for the Gospel.

The other reason Paul mentions for working is so that a person won’t be in any need. As I mentioned earlier, there is dignity in providing for oneself, while all the time recognizing that the ability and opportunity for work is a gift from God and thanking Him for it. If we provide for ourselves, we are not a burden for another. Hopefully, we will be blessed with a little extra so that we can provide for those who aren’t able to provide for themselves.

There is something of a parallel to this in Ephesians 4:28, “*The one who steals must no longer steal; but rather he must labor, producing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with the one who has need*.” It is important for those of us who are citizens of Christ’s Kingdom to work so that we can provide for the poor. As Jesus said in Matthew 26:11, *“[Y]ou always have the poor with you”*. And throughout the Bible, we see God’s concern for the poor.

What ties these four verses together is love. There needs to be philadelphia between all of God’s children here on earth and especially within a congregation. But one way that love is shown is by providing for oneself so as not to be a burden on other Christians. This is not to say that there is any shame or wrong-doing in accepting help when it is needed. In fact, accepting help when needed provides a blessing for the one giving. We must also be aware of pride. Not accepting help that is truly needed is the sin of pride.

Although these verses focus on earning a living and monetary assistance, help given to fellow Christians doesn’t have to be money; most of the time, it’s probably not. Giving time is even more valuable; whether it is helping with some physical activity, praying for the person’s concerns, or just talking with and listening to them. Always be ready to share philadelphia. And don’t be afraid to ask for help; after all, that’s what brothers and sisters are for.

Prayer

Thank You Lord God for the Holy Spirit, who works in our lives to bring the fruit of love to be born and to ripen; to be shared with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Without His constant guidance, we would not be able to fulfill this command of our Master. May He continue His work in us, that the love becomes an ever-widening stream, until the day it is perfected in the presence of Jesus.

Thank You Lord for work. Because of our sin, it is no longer the joy that You designed it to be. But by Your grace, we can find satisfaction and enjoyment in work. Bless our work, so that our abundance can be used to bless others. Provide for us the opportunities to share; that Your Kingdom may be built up here on earth.

Provide us Lord, with peace and contentment, that we may be an attraction to those who are outside of Your Kingdom. Use us, to grow the number of Your subjects that You may be glorified by the increase of Your Kingdom. We look forward to our coming King; prepare us for His return.

In the name of Jesus we pray

Amen