

## Foundations of a Flourishing Church

*Now Concerning Brotherly Love* (1 Thessalonians 4:9-12)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on February 21, 2021

### Introduction

- ❖ We had quite a week here in Houston. We knew last Sunday that an arctic freeze was on its way and that it was going to be cold. But we didn't know that so many of us would have to endure record lows for multiple nights with no power, no central heating, and no running water. And pretty much every one of us has been affected to one degree or another.
  - And just like with Hurricane Harvey, three and a half years ago, and like with the pandemic that's been dragging on since last March – **this catastrophic freeze reminds us of how little control we have over the forces of nature.** No matter how advanced our technology gets and how high our standard of living rises – just like that we can find ourselves sitting in the dark, with candles flickering, huddled under thick layers of blankets trying to stay warm. No lights. No TV. No WiFi. Pretty much no cellular service. We're humbled and rightly reminded that we are not in control.
  
- ❖ **But just like with Harvey and like with the pandemic, these catastrophes also provide an opportunity for our brotherly love to shine bright in the midst of darkness.** I was out of power for a couple days so I was largely offline. But I did appreciate the few text messages that got through from members expressing concern for us in the extreme cold, especially for our newborn. And when I finally got internet access and visited the GroupMe we created during the pandemic, I was pleased to see so many messages going back and forth. Members reaching out to care for each other. Those with power were offering those who lost power a place to sleep to shelter from the cold. There was so much sharing of advice and sharing of plumbers. Members were helping each other clean the mess made by busted pipes. That's what a loving church does. That's what you want to see in a flourishing church.
  - Well, we have plenty more to do to recover from yet another natural disaster. So that means we have plenty more opportunities to show brotherly love. **And, by the providence of God, it turns out that today's text in our series through 1 Thessalonians concerns brotherly love shared among a community of believers.**
  
- ❖ Now so far, we've been saying that Paul wrote this letter *not* to particularly call out bad behavior or false teaching like you find in a book like 1 Corinthians. He was writing mainly to express his gratitude that the Thessalonians were still walking strong the Lord despite persecution. Persecution that had forced Paul to abruptly cut short his stay with them. So for the most part, this letter is expressing praise and thanksgiving for the recipients.
  - **But here in chapter 4, Paul begins to address some concerns in the church.** Now these could be concerns that the Thessalonians themselves brought up to Paul in a prior letter (like what you find in 1 Corinthians 7:1). Or they're concerns that Timothy included in his report after coming back from the city (4:9, 13; 5:1).
  
- ❖ The first concern was over brotherly love. Look at v9, "*Now concerning brotherly love.*" Now it's surprising that this was a concern among them, since in earlier chapters, Paul was boasting about their love (1:2; 3:6) and their reputation for being a loving church (1:7-8). It goes to show that no church is perfect, and that there always room to grow in every church.

- ❖ Now we saw last week that someone in this church was doing harm to the body – wronging a brother in a matter dealing with sexual immorality (4:6). **Well in today's text, we learn there that was a small minority in the church that was selfishly exploiting the kindness of others.** Instead of valuing work, they had embraced a slothful attitude of idleness. This unhealthy dependence on the generosity of others led to tension within the body.
  - Paul says the solution is brotherly love. They need to show brotherly love more and more. **And in some cases, that means learning to say “No” to someone asking for a handout.** And instead, to try to instill within them a Christian work ethic. It's like that saying about how you can give a man a fish, and you'll feed him for a day. But if you teach a man to fish, you'll feed him for a lifetime.
  
- ❖ **It might sound cruel, but sometimes refusing to give an idle Christian what they're asking for can actually be an act of brotherly love.** That's a practical lesson we get from this brief passage. Now as we look more closely, I'll show you three principles about brotherly love: (1) Brotherly love calls us to treat one another as family, (2) Brotherly love compels us to give generously to the needy among us, and (3) Brotherly love aspires to instill a healthy self-reliance and work ethic.

### **Brotherly Love Calls Us to Treat One Another as Family**

- ❖ Let's consider the first principle. **First, brotherly love calls us to treat one another as family.** The word for “*brotherly love*” in v9 is a Greek word I'm sure you're all familiar with. It's the word *philadelphia*. Outside of the NT, in ancient Greek literature, *philadelphia* was a term reserved for describing the love between family members – between siblings who share the same father to be exact. **Outside of Scripture, you'd never find the term extended to relationships beyond family.** But that's what Paul and the other biblical authors have done.
  - And it's because, in a very real sense, we are family. **When you become a Christian – when you receive the new birth – you're born again into a new family.** Where fellow Christians become your brothers and sisters.
  
- ❖ You might be familiar with the various analogies that the NT uses to describe the church. The **church is like a body**, where each member is a constituent body part. Or the **church is like a temple** housing the Spirit of God, where each of us are the building blocks. Or the **church is like an embassy** tasked with a mission on earth to represent the coming kingdom of God, where Christians are like ambassadors for Christ. Or the **church is like a bride**, beautifully prepared by her bridegroom, where we collectively comprise the Bride and await for our Bridegroom's return and the marriage supper to come.
  - Those are all helpful analogies. **But Scripture is doing something different when it describes the church as a family. That's not an analogy.** There's no metaphor of comparison. The church isn't *like* a family. The church *is* a family. Scripture is not giving us an analogy – it's stating a fact. It's describing a new reality in Christ.

- ❖ Now I know it doesn't always feel that way. **I realize your affection for your parents and siblings or your spouse and children feels much stronger than with any member of your church.** Even your closest friends at church don't compare to how you feel towards your family. I understand that many Christians at church are mere strangers to you. You might recognize their face, but you don't know their name or anything about them. You certainly don't feel any affection – any brotherly love – for them.
  - That's understandable. That's because every Christian is still a work in progress. We're in a process. It's called sanctification, which we talked about it in last week's passage (4:3). **And in this process of sanctification, we're always trying to match how we feel with what we know to be true.**
  
- ❖ **I know I'm justified in Christ.** That's what the Gospel tells me. I'm counted righteous in the sight of God because by faith I'm covered in the blood and righteousness of Christ. But I don't always feel forgiven. Many days I still feel guilty. Part of my sanctification is to start feeling forgiven and free – just as I really am in Christ.
  - **Or I know I'm a child of God.** That's what Scripture says. I know I've been adopted in Christ. But I often still feel and act like an orphan. I don't feel safe and secure. I can still be walled off or unwilling to love or be loved. Part of my sanctification is to start feeling loved like a child of God – just as I really am in Christ.
    - It's understandable if you don't – at this moment – feel like family with other Christians. If you don't love them as much as you love your blood relations. It means you're a work in progress. You're still working out your sanctification.
  
- ❖ Well, just as a Christian should never be content to continually feel like a guilty sinner or feel like an unloved orphan – **in the same way, we shouldn't be content to continually feel little brotherly love or affection towards one another in the church.** It may be how we feel right now, but how we feel doesn't necessarily reflect what is reality.
  
- ❖ That's what Paul taught in every church he planted. That's why he could assume this shared understanding in his letter. Let me read v9, *“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.”*
  - Paul felt no need to provide further instruction on brotherly love and how it calls us to treat one another as family – **because the believers have been taught by God (theodidaktoi) to love another.** That's one of those new Greek words that Paul probably coined. It literally says you've been God-taught.
  
- ❖ Considering how Paul mentioned a verse earlier that the Holy Spirit had been given to them (4:8) – **by God-taught he probably meant the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit, who was sent by Christ to teach his disciples by bringing to remembrance all that he said** (Jn 14:26). And in Romans 8:16, Paul says it's the Spirit himself who bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God. That we are brothers and sisters in the same family of God.

- ❖ **Church, in the same way, I don't think you need me to tell you that we're family.** You already knew that. You've been God-taught. He teaches you through the pages of Scripture. He teaches you through the inner witness of the Spirit. You know we're brothers and sisters and that we ought to feel brotherly love for one another. **But what we need to work on is feeling that way and treating each other that way.** That's the work of sanctification – that process that the same Holy Spirit will enable and empower as we walk in step with Him.
  - No new Christian immediately starts off loving other believers like family. **Everyone has to grow into it and learn to recognize and respect the biblical duty we have towards one another.** And especially those of us who grew up influenced by the rugged individualism that's so cherished in American culture. We, in particular, might struggle with (and even resist) the idea that we have a duty to our church family that takes priority over our personal ambitions and preferences.
  
- ❖ But that's what I love about being in a bi-cultural church where we (who are more shaped by a Western culture) can be influenced by our brothers and sisters who are more shaped by an Eastern culture – **where filial piety is one of the highest virtues.** That's where you're taught growing up to prioritize your duty to family over your own ambitions.
  - A good illustration of this difference is to consider two Disney films that convey these two cultural values. In *The Little Mermaid*, the heroine's story arc is all about chasing true love even if it means abandoning your responsibility to family and leaving your home altogether. But in *Mulan*, the heroine's story arc is about setting aside personal ambition and putting family first. In the recent live-action adaptation, the film even ends with Filial Piety being added as a fourth virtue – in addition to being Brave, Loyal, and True. In other words, being true to yourself doesn't trump your duty to family. **Being true to yourself is only discovered through recognizing your communal identity and respecting your duty to that larger community.**
  
- ❖ That's one of the values in Asian culture that Scripture doesn't confront but affirms and expands upon. **The gospel expands the category of family to include the people of God.** So now – in the way you feel a sense of duty and responsibility to care for your parents or your siblings – you have a similar duty to one another as fellow members of the church.
  - In **Galatians 6:10**, Paul says, "*So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.*" **Especially conveys a sense of duty – a priority – we have towards the family of God.** Towards our brothers and sisters in the faith. To love them with a brotherly love.

### **Brotherly Love Compels Us to Generously Give to the Needy Among Us**

- ❖ Now what does that look like on a practical level? How should we practically display this kind of brotherly love? That's where we turn to the second principle we can draw. **Second, brotherly love compels us to generously give to the needy among us.** That's what the Thessalonians had a reputation for doing, and what Paul encourages them to do more and more. Listen to v10, "*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.*"

- ❖ **What we already learned about the Thessalonians from previous messages is that they had gained a reputation for brotherly love through their radical generosity.** They gladly took part in an international relief effort Paul was organizing. Back in **Acts 11:27-30**, we're told there was a prophet who prophesied in the Antioch church (where Paul was stationed) that there would be a great famine coming. Then we're told in v29, "*So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea.*" Paul and Barnabas were given the responsibility to carry out this relief effort among the Gentile churches to help meet the practical needs of Jewish Christians living in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 24:17; Rom 15:25–28, 31; 2 Cor 8–9).
  
- ❖ So think about it. **The same Apostle Paul – whom we all know was passionate about gospel preaching and evangelizing – was equally passionate about mercy ministries and helping meet practical needs, especially among the household of faith.**
  - And the Thessalonian church shared his passion. Not only were they giving generously to meet the needs of fellow church members, they were showing brotherly love to other Christians in churches throughout Macedonia. Christians they didn't even know personally. They didn't know their names. They didn't know their faces. **But what they did know is that they were family – that they were brothers and sisters in Christ – and that they had a filial duty to help each other.**
  
- ❖ **This biblical version of filial piety envisions that in a healthy church – where brotherly love is flourishing – there will be no Christian among us who remains in need.** Because we'll take care of each other as family. In the book of Acts, we're given glimpses of this worked out in the early church.
  - In **Acts 2:44-45**, we read about the church in Jerusalem, "*44And all who believed were together and had all things in common. 45And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.*" We read another description of the church in **Acts 4:34-35**, "*34There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold 35and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.*" That's what brotherly love looks like in practice. **When it flourishes among us, there will not be a needy person among us.**
  
- ❖ As a church, this calls for us to take a deep look in the mirror. **Are we willing to tolerate the fact that there's a needy person among us – a fellow brother or sister in Christ who is suffering and in need of help?** I doubt we would tolerate it if we learned that our elderly parents were suffering or if we knew that our children were hurting and in need. We would immediately rush to their aid. **Why then would we tolerate unmet needs within the body of Christ?** Likely because we still don't recognize each other as family and feel that same filial duty to love and to care for each other.

- ❖ **Friends, the difficulties we experienced this past week have provided ample opportunity to show brotherly love by meeting practical needs.** I'm certain we have church members who busted pipes and leaky ceilings who will need your help – whether you're skilled with your hands to assist in repairs or you're generous in your resources to offer financial aid. That's why I'm so thankful our church has a benevolence ministry to help each other in financial distress, and last year we set up a COVID-19 Relief Fund for those who lost employment during the pandemic. May there not be a needy person among us!
  - And our brotherly love should not be reserved for only members of our church. **Like the Thessalonians, we should extend that love to other churches.** To brothers and sisters in Christ across town and across the globe – even if we don't know their names nor their faces. All we need to know is that we are one in Christ and members of the same household of God.
  
- ❖ **Church, what will it look like for us to show love to other churches?** I was encouraged to hear in the financial report in last Friday's membership meeting – that we ended the year with a \$300,000 operating surplus since so many ministry expenses never materialized in 2020 due to the pandemic. Last Saturday, the Church Council formed an ad hoc committee to determine how to best steward that surplus.
  - Now I think it's prudent for us to consider internal needs since we can already forecast a number of expenses related to facility repair that are coming down the line. And the ball is already rolling on our building expansion plans. So there is good reason to save a portion of that surplus for future expenses that we know are coming.
  
- ❖ But at the same time, there are so many smaller churches in our city (and around the country and globe) that are equally faithful to the gospel but were hit much harder by this pandemic. Some of them closed their books for 2020 deep in the red. **Let us pray for wisdom in how to steward our surplus with the guiding principle of brotherly love – for our own people's needs but also the needs of other churches in the larger family of God.**

### **Brotherly Love Aspires to Instill a Healthy Self-Reliance and Work Ethic**

- ❖ Now as we continue in our text, in vv11-12, we actually get to Paul's main concern, which was to gently correct a small minority of believers in the church who were exploiting kindness and embracing idleness. At first glance, it seems like vv11-12 take up a new topic about work and idleness, but they're actually connected to this exhortation on showing brotherly love more and more. This is the third principle to draw: **Brotherly love aspires to instill in each other a healthy self-reliance and work ethic.**
  
- ❖ **Now there definitely exists an unhealthy form of self-reliance that should be avoided.** We already hinted at that rugged individualism that American culture tends to elevate – where I don't need anyone; where I can do it myself; where I don't feel a sense of filial duty or communal responsibility. That attitude can be described as a prideful self-reliance.

- ❖ **But there is a healthy self-reliance that Scripture supports. That's derived from a work ethic that sees work itself – not as a curse – but as a gift from God.** Listen to vv11-12. After urging them to show brotherly love more and more, Paul says, *“<sup>11</sup>and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, <sup>12</sup>so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.”*
- ❖ Now this idea of living quietly is *not* being contrasted with living noisily – as if being boisterous or talkative is the concern. **No, the concern is to live a respectable life that doesn't cause unnecessary disruptions or problems in the community.** The idea of living quietly fits neatly with the phrase *"mind your own affairs"*. When we hear "mind your own business", the tone is negative. It's like saying stop being nosey. But that's not what's conveyed in the Greek. **It just means to keep yourself occupied with your work so as not to grow overly dependent on others.** Notice how that's stressed at the end of v12.
  - This makes sense as Paul goes on to urge them *“to work with your hands.”* In Greek culture, manual labor was despised. Working with your hands was for servants or the artisan class. There must have been some in the church who shared that sentiment. **They refused to work when they were capable of doing so and were living off the generosity of others.** That's unloving – not only because you're exploiting kindness– but also you're diverting needed resources away from those who are truly in need.
- ❖ Now in our text, you can tell Paul was approaching this problem with a light touch. He's couched his correction in a lot of pastoral encouragement – praising them for their flourishing love. He was hoping that that small minority among them – exploiting kindness and embracing idleness – would see that brotherly love should compel them to repent and to work with their own hands and to provide for themselves. But they didn't get the message.
  - By his second letter to them, Paul is more explicit with a stronger rebuke. Listen to **2 Thessalonians 3:11-12**, *“<sup>11</sup>For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. <sup>12</sup>Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.”*
- ❖ So here's the big picture. **Brotherly love calls for us to financially help those among us who are truly helpless on their own.** We're talking about those who don't have blood relatives who can help when they're unable to care for themselves. **The widow and orphan epitomized this category of needy persons.**
  - Paul made sure that the churches he planted had a ministry that cared for the widows and orphans who were truly helpless. In 1 Timothy, he gives Timothy instructions on how to care for widows in their distress. But he also teaches Timothy to distinguish true widows in need from idle busybodies who need to be rebuked (1 Tim 5:3-16).
- ❖ **So while there is a genuine need for a spirit of generosity in the church and a ministry of benevolence, there is also a need for wisdom to distinguish the needy from the idle.** In our efforts to help the truly helpless, we must be careful not to enable those who are exploiting kindness and embracing idleness.

- ❖ **Instead, our efforts should be aimed at teaching them to value the dignity of work.** To instill a Christian work ethic. That comes from recognizing that work is fundamentally not a curse from God but a gift to mankind. Adam and Eve were commissioned to work the Garden in Genesis 2 *before* the Fall – before the curse of sin fell upon Creation in Genesis 3.
  - **So work itself is not a curse. But on this side of the Fall, work has been cursed.** It can be painful and tiresome. The earth is now stingy in giving up its crops and instead brings forth thorns and thistles. That makes work hard.
  
- ❖ Now hearing that might make an idle Christian more inclined to despise work all the more. **But that's where that same Christian must remember that the same God who put work under a curse – is the same God sent his Son into the world to get to work** (cf. Jn 5:17).
  - Jesus came to do a job. **His work involved carrying a heavy cross and then climbing on it.** By doing so, he took upon himself the curse of sin. Which includes not only the curse of our eternal condemnation but also the curse of work's pain and futility. **Jesus not only redeemed us from the curse, he redeemed work itself.**
  
- ❖ And now as the redeemed, we can approach work as a means to glorify God and to love others. **So long as we are able, we should be diligently working to provide for our own needs and that of our household – to develop a healthy self-reliance.** So that the truly helpless among us (those within our church family who can't support themselves) may be the beneficiaries of our benevolence ministries. And also, through working, we have the means to generously give in order to fund those ministries.
  - This not only shows love to one another in the church. This shows a compelling witness to non-believers in the community around us. In v12, Paul says we do this so that we may walk properly before outsiders. **When we show brotherly love by generously giving to the needy among us – which is enabled by having developed a healthy self-reliance and work ethic – the world takes notice.**
  
- ❖ Let me share two quotes from the perspective of outsiders looking in on the early church. This first comes from the historian **Lucian** who despised Christians but had to admit: *“It is incredible to see the fervor with which the people of that religion help each other in their wants. They spare nothing. Their first legislator Jesus has put it into their head that they are brethren.”* They treat each other as family. Non-Christians notice and find that incredible. This second quote come from **Tertullian**, an early church father, but he's telling us how the Roman world speaks of Christians. He says, *“It is our care for the helpless, our practice of lovingkindness, that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. ‘Look’, they say, ‘How these Christians love one another!’”*
  - **Would you pray with me that, by God's grace, those words might be spoken of us by the non-believing community around us?** May our care for the helpless among us – may that kind of brotherly love – brand us in the eyes of outsiders. Though they may not yet believe in our Christ, may they be compelled to say, "Look how these Christians love one another!"