**Brotherly love and godly living** 8/10/23 dkm

Read: Genesis 3:9-24, 1Thessalonians 4

Text: 1Thessalonians 4:9-12

Psalms: 111, 37:23-28, 128, 117

The answer is, ‘To get to the other aside of the road’; what is the question- you probably know this riddle! But knowing the question when you only have the answer is not easy; it is like listening to someone talking on their phone. In this letter we have Paul’s response to questions or comments from the Thessalonians, as conveyed by Timothy when he came to Paul at Corinth (3:6). The only record we have is this letter written by Paul, so from this we seek to discern what was going on in the church at Thessalonica in AD50.

When Paul writes ‘But concerning brotherly love’, he is probably answering a concern he was aware of; we find the same ‘formula’ at the beginning of chapter 5. While it is helpful to understand something about the church to which Paul was writing, the important thing for us, as it was for the Thessalonians, is to understand, to accept, and to apply, the teaching being passed on to us by the apostle of our risen saviour and Lord.

Paul learned from Timothy of the faith and love of these new believers. He writes to tell them of his prayer of thanks to God for them, these people who turned to God from idols after hearing the gospel preached by Paul. It is amazing how much he taught them in the three Sabbaths he was in Thessalonica, but with their eyes opened, and with the gift of the Holy Spirit, they now understood the Scriptures in a whole new light. They would have known the Ten Commandments, but now understood these as Jesus summarised them in the two love commands: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and, Love your neighbour as yourself (Mat 22:37). Paul does not refer to these directly but they are the basis of what he teaches in this chapter.

If we love God we will want to please him; the cross of Christ tells us how much he loves us (John 3:16). To please God we will obey the commands Paul gave through the Lord Jesus (4:2, 11). God is holy and his will for us is to be holy. To be holy we must abstain from sexual immorality. This is the first lesson the apostle has for these believers, and for us, and the first way to be different from the society in which we live. But God’s commands are not all don’ts. The second lesson found in verses 9-12 is positive. It is again based on the command to love another and relates to how we live and relate to one another in the body of Christ, the church. Our subheadings are: ‘Love one another’, ‘Lead a quiet life’ and, ‘Lack nothing’.

**1. Love one another**

In the upper room on the night before his death, Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment saying, ‘Love one another as I have loved you’ (John 13:34). It was ‘new’ in the sense of the reference to the love of Jesus; there is a command in the OT and the NT about loving your neighbour as yourself (Lev 19:18, Mat 22:39). Paul writes that they are ‘taught by God’ this commandment (4:9 only here in NT) meaning they had the Holy Spirit dwelling in their hearts (John 15:13, 14).

When Jesus told his disciples to love one another he was referring to brotherly love, or love within the fellowship of believers, although he used the word *agape* rather than *philadelphia*. Paul uses both words in verse 9, starting with *philadelphia*, brotherly love, and ending with *agape*, selfless love. Love is at the heart of the gospel, beginning with God’s love for us and resulting in our love for God and for one another. The first fruit of the Spirit is love, and love is the greatest of ‘faith, hope, and love’ (Gal 5:22, 1Cor 13). ‘He who does not love does not know God’ (1John 4:8). Paul had heard about the love of these Thessalonians extending to brethren across the churches in Macedonia: Philippi, Berea and maybe others (4:10). They must have showed this love in practical ways, like helping the poor in their need. But there are always ways and opportunities to show more love, so Paul goes on, ‘But we urge you brethren, that you increase more and more’ (4:10).

As we think about ways and opportunities open to us to increase more and more in love towards one another, we come back to this word *philadelphia*. This Greek word originally meant love in relation to a father; in other words, love within a biological family. So using this word *philadelphia* of members in the local church, the apostle is telling them to love one another as if they’re in the same family. They are in a spiritual family with Christ as the head, so are all brothers and sisters in Christ. Love for one’s biological family is very strong- we are talking about wife and husband, about brothers and sisters. Well, love within the church should be no less than this! Such love rules out favouritism towards biological brothers or sisters. I believe we are in a most mature church in this regard! But, as Paul would say, we still have room to improve and grow in such love.

**2. Lead a quiet life**

Love for God and love for one another are the basis of Christian ethics and the Christian way of life. James calls the second the ‘royal law’ according to the Scriptures (James 2:8). Paul commends the Thessalonians for loving one another but urges them to do so more and more (4:10). But what does brotherly love look like? Paul gives a brief overview in verses 11 and 12. In his letter to the Romans he does the same thing, telling us to ‘be kindly affectionate to one another in brotherly love, in honour giving preference to one another, not lagging in diligence… distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality’ (Rom 12:10-13). Here in Thessalonians he includes work as a part of godly living. Work is an essential feature of our lives: ‘If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat’ (2Thess 3:10). How we do our work and how we live are aspects of life impacted by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul commanded the Thessalonians to do three things: ‘aspire to a quiet life’ or more literally, get stirred up about quiet living, ‘mind your own business’, and, ‘work with your own hands’. Put negatively, don’t be a bullying fanatic, a busybody, or a bludger! ‘Nearly every church has them’ writes one commentator, sometimes all three features in one person. I am not going to point the finger at anyone today, but years ago, O my! A fellow came long telling me about the ‘red heifer’ in the Bible and wanting to lead a Bible study. I urged him to look at other parts of the Bible and focus on the gospel of Jesus Christ. Let others live a quiet life, and live a quiet life yourself. Encourage others, as you see Paul doing in this letter, and guide them in ‘the whole counsel of God’, not just a particular subject you happen to find intriguing. Paul commands us to aspire to live a quiet life, not to be disturbing the peace and harmony of the brethren.

The Thessalonians appear to have become fixated on the second coming of Christ, a subject on which they lacked knowledge. Some Christians today get fixated on this subject, showing little interest in the rest of the Bible; some end up in a secretive, self-destructive cult. I have often said that many Christians ignore the second coming of Christ, and now I am saying that others talk about nothing else! We need to keep a balance in our reading, our teaching, and our focus in the Christian life. This is a good reason for expository, verse by verse preaching, as you hear in this church.

The second command of the apostle is, ‘mind your own business’ or in the negative, do not be a busybody (4:11, 2Thess 3:11). Often churches have at least one person who must know everything about everybody. If you know something about someone and don’t tell them you may disturb their sleep! They consider it their business, even responsibility, to know all such gossip. This supposed ‘work’ is not useful, and often results in hurt and disunity. Gossipers are often people who do not have sufficient work to do. If we are busy in our work and in our families and in our church we will not have time to be busybodies. David was tempted, and fell into sin, when he was relaxing on his rooftop rather than reporting for battle. Facebook has of course, added a whole new dimension to gossiping.

The third command given by Paul is, ‘work with your own hands’ (4:11). Buddhism is a religion with many monks- a bit like the ancient Church of Rome. Monks do not work; they go around the streets begging. We saw children dressed as monks walking the streets of Yangon with their begging bowls. Israel’s economy is being threatened by ultra-orthodox Jews who do not work; they live off others or the state. Some years ago I supervised so-called ‘work-for the dole’ individuals here in Sydney. It was a struggle getting some to shovel mulch or push a wheelbarrow, but if I did not sign them off they did not get their welfare payment.

For Christians, work is part and parcel of godly living, according to Paul; there is a dignity about work. Paul was a preacher with the right to be supported by the church, but he did not despise manual labour. He worked making tents with leather, a very smelly business. He did this until the church could support him. Educated or rich Greeks and Romans despised such lowly work. They hired slaves to do such work. New converts in Thessalonica lived in such a society. Work, like many other things in life, took on a new meaning for these converts. Yes, work is an essential part of godly living.

I am reading a book about faith and work, about a church that has set up such a centre in New York City. Subjects include, the design of work, the dignity of work, work as cultivation, and work as service planned by God. When God made man he put him in a garden with lots of trees which he was to care for; there is no mention of cultivating crops (Gen 2:15). But then man sinned against God and he was thrown out of this garden. God cursed the ground, and thorns or weeds came up in the ‘herbs of the field’ or crops that man toiled over to feed himself and his family (Gen 3:17, 18). Jesus, the Son of God, worked as a carpenter and, as just seen, the apostle Paul worked with leather. There is a dignity about work, and also a necessity if we are to eat! (2Thess 3:10).

As redeemed people, we do our work as unto the Lord, not to men. Paul encouraged even slaves to work honestly, not just when their master was watching. He also writes, ‘Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him work with his own hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need’ (Eph 4:28). Work is not just about getting rich and enjoying life. We should be looking to how we can help those in genuine need, not looking to what others might give to us; although, if you are in genuine need graciously accept the help of the church. The ministry of the church requires money, but above all requires members to be living godly lives.

**3. Lack nothing**

Paul concludes this section on brotherly love reminding us about ‘walking properly towards those who are outside’ (4:12). Outsiders will be attracted to a church demonstrating brotherly love; it will be something very different to them! But they will not stay long if they encounter bullying fanatics, busybodies, or bludgers. ‘As we have opportunity let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith’ (Gal 6:10). We welcome and help people in genuine need, whoever they may be, recognising that our first call is to provide for our own family (1Tim 5:8), and for fellow believers in need.

When we do our work unto the Lord, the Lord is powerful to bless the works of our hands. He will not bless hands that do nothing! With the Lord blessing our work, we will lack nothing. We will not see our children going without bread (Ps 37:25, Mat 7:11). The world may criticise and ridicule our church for many things, but let it not be for the disorderly, lazy, or unloving lives of its members.