

LIFE TOGETHER



1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Fourth Message

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SERIES: FAITH, LOVE AND HOPE

Life Together. We miss it. Restrictions on gatherings have now entered their sixth month with no end in sight. We long to see one another in person rather than in little Zoom boxes. We miss Life Together. We miss seeing one another face-to-face, in the flesh. But families are also finding that they have too much life together. Couples and families are not used to spending so much time together in the same space. They want a break from each other! So, Life Together is invigorating, but Life Together can also be taxing.

Christians are a gathered people: gathered to God in Christ through his Spirit to be his people, to be a new family made up of lots of very different people who were not family before. And we are gathered into local churches which meet together regularly, albeit now virtually. As a gathered community we learn how to live life together in a way that is pleasing to God.

On his second missionary journey, Paul and his traveling companions, Silas and Timothy, crossed over the Aegean Sea into Europe for the first time. They preached the gospel in Philippi, and Thessalonica, and Berea. They couldn't stay long in each city, only a few weeks, because their preaching about Jesus provoked riots and they had to leave in a hurry. But in each city a new church was formed: new followers of Jesus learning how to be family, learning how to live together in community. Though Paul was quickly physically-distanced from these new communities, he had a long, close attachment to them, especially Philippi and Thessalonica. In our New Testament we have three of his letters to these two churches.

Earlier this year we looked at the first half of Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica. We saw how pleased he was with this young church, how thankful for "your work produced by faith (fulness), your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:3). Faith, Love and Hope: that's the title of this series. We saw the depths of Paul's affection for these young Christians, "as a nursing mother cares for her children...as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging" (2:7, 11-12). He longed to see them again face-to-face, but was prevented from doing so. Instead, he sent Timothy, who returned with a good report. But this only intensified Paul's longing to see them in person to "supply what is lacking in your faith" (3:10). "What is lacking in your faith": it's not that they were lacking in doctrinal understanding. Rather, there was some shortfall in their faithfulness to Jesus their Lord, in how they were living their daily lives, how they were living life together. Paul wanted to make some repairs so that they would be better-equipped for this new life together as the people of God in Thessalonica.

Still unable to visit them, Paul wrote them this letter, probably sending it with Timothy. The last two chapters contain his remedial instruction addressing some areas in which they were falling short in their faithful living. This is what we will look at these next four Sundays. Lest we be too harsh on the Thessalonians, we must remember that this is a very young church, that Paul has started his letter with three chapters of affectionate thanksgiving and praise,

and that his instruction is course-correction rather than rebuke. Remember, he is very fond of this church.

We resume Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians at the beginning of chapter 4.

1. A Life Pleasing to God (4:1-2)

As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. (1 Thess 4:1-2 NIV)

These "other matters" to which Paul now turns are the remedial instructions addressing the shortfalls in faithful living that Timothy has reported. During the few weeks that Paul was present in Thessalonica, he had instructed the new Christians not just about the right things to believe, but also the right things to do. We have a tendency in the American evangelical church to privilege believing over doing, faith over works. We even hold them to be in opposition: faith or works, not both. What matters is to preach the gospel of God's grace in Christ, so that people will profess faith in Jesus and be saved. Saving faith in Jesus is the end. But saving faith is not the end; it's only the beginning. Confessing Jesus Christ as Lord is the entrance into a lifelong journey of learning and practicing how to live in faithfulness, how to live in loyalty and devotion, to the one to whom we have now given our allegiance: even Jesus Christ our Lord. This is a life of ongoing transformation, of being formed into God's likeness in Christ through the work of his Spirit in us. The Thessalonians have made a good start: they are living lives pleasing to God. Paul urges them to do so more and more, to keep pressing on in their spiritual formation.

In our call to worship we heard these well-known words from Romans 12: "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Rom 12:2). Do not conform but be transformed. Or, as J. B. Phillips famously translated this: "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God remould your minds from within." Christian life should be counter-cultural. We are called to be different.

Paul addresses two aspects of Life Together. The first is negative: what *not* to do in the realm of sexual ethics (4:3-8). The second is positive: what *to* do in loving one another (9-12). Both called for radically different behavior in the first century. Both are still hot-button topics today: sexual ethics and brotherly love.

2. Holy Sexuality (4:3-8)

Concerning sexual ethics, Paul writes,

It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should

avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; 6 and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit. (4:3-8)

“It is God’s will.” When I was reading this passage with a group earlier this year we had a long discussion on this verse about finding the will of God. Christians often place enormous pressure upon themselves to find God’s will, his one perfect will, and they live in fear that if they make one wrong choice they may miss out on his perfect will for them forever thereafter. But God has the same will for every one of his people. It’s simply one word: sanctification or holiness. Paul uses the word three times in this paragraph, though NIV translates it in three different ways: sanctified (3), holy (4), live a holy life (7).

Sanctification: this is a very demanding will. Holiness is nothing less than our total dedication to the interests of God. Some of you are familiar with the text at the front of PBC Palo Alto that reads: “You are not your own, you are bought with a price” (1 Cor 6:19-20). This is a hard word for a society that values individual freedom, personal choice and autonomy. This calls for surrender of our own will, but herein we find our true freedom: “whom to serve is perfect freedom.” The one to whom we surrender our will is the one who has created us and therefore knows better than anyone what it means to be human: he is the designer of humans. The one to whom we surrender our will is the one who entered into our human story as the one perfect human and therefore knows better than anyone what it means to be human: he is the true human. It is in surrendering to God in Christ through his Spirit that we find our true humanity, because what we surrender is our false self that is self-centered and inward-turned. Surrendering our false self and putting on true humanity as we are formed into Christ is a life-long process. It doesn’t happen instantaneously.

Under the heading of sanctification, Paul lists three specific items under the heading of sanctification: avoid sexual immorality, learn to control your own body, and don’t overreach and take advantage of a Christian brother or sister.

Sexual immorality (*porneia*) covers all sexual activity outside marriage. The Jews of the first century had a high sexual ethic. They understood holiness because God had called Israel to be a holy people, to live life differently from the surrounding peoples. God told them: don’t behave like the Egyptians from whose land you have come; don’t behave like the Canaanites into whose land you are entering; behave in a different way: be holy as I am holy, says the Lord. But Jesus upped the ante; he intensified the law to probe behind behavior into the desire of the human heart: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt 5:27-28).

Roman Gentiles did not have a high sexual ethic. Sanctification or holiness was an unknown concept. As in many societies there was a double standard. It was accepted that men follow their urges, thereby showing their virility, their manliness. They saw no need to

control their bodies. But reputable women were expected to be chaste. So the Christian sexual ethic called for a radical change of behavior for Gentile men. They had to learn to control their bodies, and no longer follow their own passionate desires. This was radically counter-cultural. Evidently some Christians in Thessalonica were struggling with this radical change in behavior.

Tragically, whatever the sexual misbehavior in the Thessalonian church, it was damaging life together: someone was wronging and taking advantage of a Christian brother or sister. We don’t know what “this matter” is in v. 6, perhaps adultery, but presumably the recipients of the letter knew what Paul was referring to. Someone, or a pair, were acting in their own self-interest, indulging their own desires, to the harm of community life together, to the harm of their brother or sister. This is against fundamental principles of sanctification in the Christian life as God’s people.

Again notice that Paul places these three commands under *sanctification*, holiness. We cannot have a serious conversation about Christian sexual ethics without agreeing first on the need for spiritual formation, that Christians are called to the life-long process of sanctification. The spirit of this age is self-indulgent: indulge your desires, express your individuality, especially in the realm of sexuality. We should not be surprised that non-Christians engage in sexual immorality: they don’t know God, and holiness is an unknown concept. But the Christian sexual ethic is counter-cultural today, just as it was in the first century. It presupposes submitting our desires to the process of sanctification.

We are all creatures of desire. We are not like Buddhists who believe that desire itself is wrong. Desires and affections are part of what it means to be human. But when we come to Christ we find that our desires and affections are disordered. One aspect of spiritual formation into Christ is the re-ordering of our affections, the channeling of our desires in a way that is healthy for us and promotes flourishing of all around us in Life Together. Again, the Christian life is not just about what we believe, having the right doctrine. It is about how we live life every single day, conformed not to the pattern of this world, but to Christ.

In the second half of the paragraph (6b-8), Paul gives three reasons to avoid sexual immorality: the Lord will punish such wrongdoers, God has called us to holiness not uncleanness, and such behavior rejects the sanctifying work of the Spirit in us. Notice the Trinitarian shape of these three reasons. We confess Jesus as Lord. As Lord, he cares about how we behave in allegiance to him, and he will one day return and judge. Our indulgence of desire makes a mockery of our confession of Jesus as Lord. Secondly, it makes a mockery of God’s purpose for us: he has called us out of impurity into holiness. Thirdly, it makes a mockery of the Holy Spirit whom God has put within us not only to give us understanding in the realm of belief, but also to transform us into Christ-likeness in the realm of faithful living.

3. Life Together (4:9-12)

Paul’s next paragraph is more positive: he turns from how *not* to behave in Life Together to some instruction about what such life in community should be.

Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all of God’s family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more

and more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody. (4:9-12)

“Your love for one another”: this is the single Greek word *philadelphia*, meaning love of brother or sister. Sibling love was highly valued in the Roman world. Men and families competed with one another to acquire greater honor and position in society. But siblings promoted one another. Family loyalty was very important.

The early church had a much more expansive view of sibling love. In Christ God has created a new family and redrawn the family lines. All those who respond to the proclamation that “there is another King, Jesus,” and give him their allegiance are adopted into God’s family through his Spirit. This family is being assembled from every nation, language, tribe and land. Male and female together as siblings. Slave and free together as siblings. Jew and Gentile together as siblings. Greek and Barbarian, even Scythian, the barbarians beyond the barbarians, as brother and sister together. The first-century world had not seen anything like this. It started in Antioch where Jews and Gentiles were first equals in Christ. Antioch, one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire, a cosmopolitan city full of Jews and Gentiles, didn’t know what to make of this: Jews and Gentiles *together*. They called them Christ-people, Christians. This was not intended as a compliment but as an expression of strangeness, a label for a people of very distinctive behavior. What was this distinctive behavior? That two very different groups, Jews and Gentiles, were now bound together as one new family.

Concerning such brotherly and sisterly love, the Thessalonian Christians had no need for Paul to instruct them further, other than to say, “do so more and more.” They were a shining example. Would that one could say that of the church today. But one cannot. Many churches are still segregated. The church is segregated because the white church would not accept blacks as brothers and sisters. The church of Western Europe, starting 600 years ago, created the construct of race to justify treating others as less than brothers and sisters, even as less than human. Not so the Thessalonian church. Not so the first-century church. They loved one another across all the cultural and societal boundaries, across all the hierarchies, across all the divisions. They were one in Christ Jesus. They were family. They were a community of *philadelphia*, loving one another as brother and sister.

We want to learn from the early church. PBCC did not set out to be a multi-ethnic church—there are plenty of churches that are doing that, including here in the South Bay. But we have become a multi-ethnic church—primarily a dual-ethnic church. I am delighted that the complexion of our church family has changed over the past twenty years. I am pleased that so many non-white people feel welcome here, feel at home, feel part of the family. I look forward to us becoming even more reflective of the community in which we live as a church, both this local community of Cupertino and the wider community of the South Bay.

The whole country and many churches are now participating in the national conversation about race and racial justice. How do we treat one another as equals when we have such a long history of not doing so? We are doing our own little part. Five weeks ago, on July 12, we had our first Conversation on Race. On August 30 we will have our second Conversation.

Paul is delighted with the brotherly love of the Thessalonian church, which is a model for all churches. But he doesn’t rest there. He does have aspirations for the church, in vv. 11-12. He wants them to aspire to something; he wants them to have ambition. The root idea of the word translated “make it your ambition” is “love of honor.” He wants them to pursue behavior that brings honor and praise. This was language the first century understood. The Roman elite constantly strove for public recognition, to climb up the socio-political ladder, rendering public service in the endless quest of honor and praise. Silicon Valley is full of such people, striving to be seen, to be praised and honored. We all want to be seen, to be praised and honored. We want to be noticed. Social media users seek fame, however fleeting. YouTube has created many stars. In the current election campaign candidates clamor to be noticed, to win our vote.

So what ambition does Paul urge upon the Thessalonian Christians? What does he want them to strive for? Again he gives a list of three items: live quietly, mind your own business, and work with your own hands. This doesn’t sound very glamorous. For Christians oriented to performance, results, growth and success, this is a let down. This too is counter-cultural not only to contemporary society but also to much contemporary Christian society, to church business. So what is Paul recommending in these seemingly humble activities?

Firstly, live quietly. This doesn’t mean live silently without speaking. I prefer to think of this word as “non-agitation.” Live in a state of serenity. Don’t be disruptive. Don’t be all worked-up inside. With the pandemic, with Black Lives Matter protests, with the ramp-up to the election, it can be very challenging to live in a non-agitated manner. We can be externally silent, but deeply agitated inside. Christians are to be a serene people.

Secondly, mind your own business. Tend to your own affairs. Don’t meddle in the affairs of others. Don’t be busy-bodies. Get on with the task which God has given you, however ordinary and unexciting that might be.

Thirdly, work with your own hands. Paul engaged in manual labor even during the short time that he was in Thessalonica (2:9). He wrote this letter from Corinth where for 18 months he worked as a tent-maker in the workshop of Priscilla and Aquila. This is not a very glamorous job, but Paul was strategic. No doubt both Christians and non-Christians visited the shop. Non-Christians he would tell about Jesus. Christians he would instruct in Christian teaching and counsel in practical matters of daily life. Like Jews in general he saw value and dignity in ordinary work, whereas his rivals, the super-apostles of whom he writes in 2 Corinthians, thought this beneath their dignity.

Live quietly, tend to your own affairs, work with your own hands. We don’t know what news Timothy had brought back that prompted this reply from Paul. It was a significant problem for Paul will address the matter again in chapter 5 and again in his second letter.

Live quietly, tend to your own affairs, work with your own hands. These three things don’t attract much attention. They won’t get written up in the Christian press. But God sees such faithful presence and he is well-pleased. Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission, now OMF, said, “A little thing is a little thing, but faithfulness in little things is a great thing.” I grew up in OMF, familiar with this statement from an early age. It is deeply-

embedded in my thinking. Similarly, Mother Teresa said, “Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.”

Many people want to do great things for God, but God cares about us doing little things. He sees the little things that we do, and we have honor in his eyes.

During this pandemic, when our movements are restricted, you may wonder what you can do. You can be faithful in the little things: love your children, love your neighbor, reach out to someone, be kind, be gentle, be generous. Do those things which are mentioned in Romans 12. Be a faithful presence in the world. When I think of faithful presence, I think of someone like Don Burgess, who for over fifty years has been a faithful presence with the Tarahumara Indians of Mexico—the little people living deep in the canyons of the Copper Canyon area.

In our conversation on race many are wondering what we can do. We want to do something to make a difference. We want to fix the problem. But racial injustice took centuries to create and it will take a long time to reverse. In the meantime there are little things we can do. We can listen, we can learn, we can lament, and we can love. We can work on overcoming the tendency to fear the Other. We can work on reaching out to people who look different from us. We can be a faithful presence.

Live quietly, tend to your own affairs, work with your own hands. Paul gives a two-fold purpose for this behavior: “so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody” (12).

Outsiders. The talk of racial justice has raised again the language of Insider and Outsider. It’s a natural tendency to divide up the world into insiders and outsiders, us and them. The Jews did this, distinguishing themselves from the Gentiles. The Greeks distinguished themselves from the barbarians, and the Scythians beyond them. The lines are redrawn for the church. The insiders are those who are in Christ. The Thessalonian Christians have been very good at extending *philadelphia*, brotherly love, throughout the whole province of Macedonia, to all who are in Christ in this new family. The outsiders are those who are not in Christ, but here Paul is saying that they are watching. They are watching how those on the inside are living. What they need to see is that those on the inside are living counter-culturally, and that this is deeply attractive, so that they will want to come inside. This is how it worked in the early church. The counter-cultural behavior of the early church was,

on the one hand, deeply-puzzling to those outside because they hadn’t seen anything like it, but also deeply attractive. Yet so often the contemporary church in the West arouses cynicism or apathy or disgust because it is so indistinguishable from the surrounding culture. We have been squeezed into world’s mold. But we’re not attractive when we’ve been conformed to those outside.

The second reason Paul gives is “so that you will have need of no one.” Probably what was happening is that there were members of the community who were not working with their own hands, who were not minding their own business, who were busy-bodies, who were disruptive. They were taking advantage of community members. Now there are people that the Christian community is to support: widows, orphans, just as God called OT Israel to look out for widows, orphans and strangers in their midst. We will always have the needy in our midst, whom it is good to support. But that was not evidently the problem here. Christians who should have supported themselves were taking advantage of others, putting their own interests first. But we are to act for the good of the community.

Paul wrote this to the Thessalonian church 2000 years ago in a very different setting, but I find it very relevant for today.

I close with the *Prayer for Generosity*:

Lord, teach us to be generous,
to serve you as you deserve,
to give and not to count the cost,
to fight and not to heed the wounds,
to toil and not to seek for rest,
to labour and not to look for any reward,
save that of knowing that we do your holy will.¹

May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. (1 Thess 3:12-13)

1. Frequently attributed to Ignatius of Loyola (16th century), but probably written in the late 19th century.