**Love and its Counterfeits**
**1 Thess 4:9-12**

What would a life that pleases God, that brings a smile to the face of God, look like, do you think? Well last week, Andy took us through the first 8 verses of chapter 4 and showed us how Paul starts out by telling us what such a life *doesn't* look like – it isn't marked by sexual immorality or controlled by lust. Which, when we live in a sex-saturated culture like we do, and when you struggle with the kind of stuff that some of us struggle with, is a big-deal.

But if I were to ask you what the opposite of sexual immorality or lust is, it wouldn't be long before someone said, 'love', would it? You see, whereas lust wants to take, love gives; where lust looks at the outside, at the external, love looks deeper, at the person, at the character. Where lust wants *now*, love waits, and serves the one it loves whilst it waits.

And so it's no surprise that when Paul is talking about what it means to walk and live in a way that pleases God, having said what it doesn't look like, when he comes to tell us what it *does* look like, right at the top of the list is love.

**1 Thess 4:9-12**

We're going to look at three things: Love as the mark of God's family, two counterfeits of love, and then why getting love right matters.

**Love: The Mark of the Family**
Now a couple of Sundays ago, Hannah, one of my daughters, was teaching the 3-4s in Sunday school. And as we were driving home I asked her how it went. She said, 'Dad it was horrible'. And I thought, what did the kids do this week? So I said, 'horrible? Why?' 'Because I said something and I heard myself saying it, and I sounded just like mum!' Which made Su laugh, because she says that when she teaches Sunday School she finds herself sounding just like her mum.

But you've experienced that haven't you? You see something of your mother or your father in you, and you shiver! You look in the mirror and see the family likeness, or someone says, 'you look just like your mum' and you go, 'o no!' Or there are times when some of you bring your parents here, and I can see them walking in the door and I think, 'well I know who that is!' Now, what is that? It's the family likeness, isn't it?

Well, what is the characteristic that should mark members of the Christian family? If God is our common heavenly Father, if Jesus is our brother, what should be the distinguishing feature of our lives where we could point and say, 'you know what, when you say that you sound just like your Father!' Or, 'when you do that, that's just what your brother would have done'?

Well, listen to Paul in v9, 'Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you.' And the word he uses for brotherly love is the word *philadelphia*, the love, the deep bond of allegiance, that families in ancient Greece would have for each other, for their flesh and blood. And Paul says *that's* what it means to live in a way that pleases God, to love your Christian brothers and

sisters in the church like that: as if they were your own flesh and blood. That's the mark of your heavenly father's family: love.

So, how would you rate a good church? Great worship? Inspiring preaching? The quality of the coffee served afterwards? The youth program? Or by the measure of love the people have for one another? You know, at the time of the Reformation, the reformers gave three marks of a true church: a true church is somewhere where the word of God is preached; where the sacraments are rightly administered and where church discipline is practised. But if you wanted to add a fourth, wouldn't it have to be, 'and where the members love one another'?

You see, so far in this letter Paul has explained his love for these Thessalonians by saying he feels like a nursing mother towards them, then a devoted father, then that he feels his absence from them as if he's been orphaned. They're all images of the people we love most in our lives - family. And now he says, the love they, and you and I, should have for one another is this same love, this same bond of family.

But many of our flesh and blood families have not been marked by love, have they? Maybe your family has been marked more by arguments and pain and division than by love. And the tragedy is that churches can be scarred like that too. But here Paul says that the life that pleases God is not going to be marked by that kind of stuff, but by this bond of love, this deep sense of family allegiance for your Christian brothers and sisters.

Which is why the apostle John writes, 'We know that we have passed out of death into life, *because* we love the brothers.' (1 John 3:14). In other words, what's one of the ways we know we're really Christians? That we really are members of the family of God? Because we love our fellow family members.

But what's interesting is that Paul says, 'but I don't really need to tell you that, because you already know it': v9 again, 'for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another.' Now, when I was growing up, there was just one evangelical Christian family in our village. Now, no one ever told me I should mock them, but I just imbibed the fact that they were odd and different and it was ok to laugh at them. And then I became a Christian. I became one of them. And over night I found that it was these odd Christian types that I wanted to be with. No one ever taught me that, it was just 'these guys are family and I want to be with them.'

And Paul says that was the experience of these Thessalonian Christians. They just *knew* a love for one another, and they knew it because God had taught them that.

But how had he taught them? Well, Paul doesn't tell us, does he? But it's not hard to guess, is it? You see, these guys would have heard the Old Testament read in the Synagogue, like Leviticus 19: 'You shall not hate your brother in your heart… but you shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Lev 19:17-18).

Then there was the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Just before writing what he writes here, Paul finishes v8 by reminding them that God 'gives his Holy Spirit to you.' And whilst the Greek and Roman gods lusted after one another and after any humans who crossed their paths, the apostle John tells us, 'God is love' (1 John 4:8), sacrificial love. So if we are genuinely filled with his Spirit we're going to hear him teaching us to love. There is going to be this inner compulsion to love one another.

But think about how a child learns anything from its parents. Imagine you want to teach your child how to use a hammer to drive a nail into a piece of wood. How would you do that? You could hand them a book and say, 'son, I want you to learn to do this, so here's a book, go read!' Or, you could sit them down and verbally teach them, 'son this is what you've got to do, you've got to take a hammer etc.' But if you really want to teach them, how will you do it? You'll show them. It's the power of example. And when you have kids, for good or bad you find your child copying what you do, or how you speak, or how you react. They call it mini-me, don't they?

And that's the third way God teaches these Thessalonians, and you and me, to love one another: by his own example. By loving *us* so much that he would send his Son to die for us. Listen to how John puts it: 'In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, *if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another*' (1 John 4:11).

And when you know your Father's love for you in Christ flooding your heart, 'that Christ would die for me', and when you know that he loves your brothers and sisters like that, we can't but love one another. It's why Jesus said, 'By this all people will know that you are *my* disciples, if you have love for one another' (John 13:35).

Which is why you've got to question what's going on in someone's heart when they say they're Christian, but church and fellowship with other Christians seems to be an add-on extra and they say with their actions 'I don't need church.' Because if they don't love Christians enough to want to be around them, looking out for them, and caring for them, are they really Christians?

But look what Paul says of these Thessalonians, v10: 'For that is indeed what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia.' So these guys they didn't just love their own little fellowship there in Thessalonica, the people who were most like them. They demonstrated a love for all their fellow Christians across the region, in multiple different churches. So this love that marks God's family is a love that transcends culture and race and, today, even denomination. Because it recognises that if you belong to Jesus, if God is your Father, then you're my brother or my sister.

Now, I don't know how you keep track of the jobs that you need to get done, but I'm into tick-lists. I write down everything I need to do, and in front of each item I draw a little square, and when I've done it I tick the box and cross the item off the

list. And there's this sense of 'done it!' But we can never do that with this call to love one another, can we? Paul says to them, 'I know you know this already, I know that God has taught you to love another, I know I don't need to write this to you, but even so', v10, 'We urge you, brothers, to do this more and more.'

Because when it comes to loving one another, none of us can ever say, 'yeh, I've go that nailed, tick the box, and move on to the next task.' There is always room for all of us to grow in this, isn't there? It's the very thing Paul prayed for them at the end of chapter 3, 'May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all' (1 Thess 3:12). Because none of us can ever say we've arrived. Whether that is relationships that need work or healing; whether that is someone who needs caring for or praying for; whether that is your friend who needs to hear a word of correction or a word of comfort, we can never love one another too much.

And as we see them loving Christians across their region, you and I cannot love our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world too much. And we cannot love our friends in other churches in this city and elsewhere too much. You cannot speak too well of them. Sure, there are going to be differences, but we love them and speak of them like brothers and sisters.

And Paul says it's this kind of love that marks God's family and the life of those who live to bring pleasure to God.

But of course, almost inevitably, wherever you find the genuine article, you can almost always find a fake, can't you?

**Two Counterfeits of Love**

And in this passage Paul highlights two fakes of this brotherly love. And they both spring from the same cause. You see, from what Paul writes in this letter, and his second letter, to this church, it seems that some of these new Christians were so convinced that Christ was going to come back soon that they had quit their jobs. And that meant that they had time on their hands *and* that they were being lazy and not earning any money.

And so the first counterfeit of love he draws attention to is that of ***the gossip and the busybody***. Look at v11, 'we urge you, brothers,… to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs.'

You see, having given up work, and with time on their hands, it seems that some of them had got into the habit of being *too* interested in others lives. As Paul says in 2 Thess 3:11, 'For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies.' And being a busybody, or a gossip, masquerades as love, doesn't it? Because it gives the appearance of being concerned about this other person who you're talking about. But in reality we gossip, and meddle, not out of love, but because we need to feel important, that we matter, that we're relevant, that we have power or influence. So gossip, or being a busybody, puts on this pretence of love, of being really interested in this other person and what's going on, but in reality, it's all about me. And it can have this negative, disruptive effect

on the family of the church, as it works against this true brotherly love that is genuinely concerned with one another.

But when you know God's love for you in Jesus, that the Son of God has died and risen for you, you don't need to gossip or meddle to feel like you matter. You already know just how much your life matters to God – it matters so much that Jesus would come and die for you. And when you know that God is in absolute sovereign control, and that the timing of Jesus' return is his, not yours, it saves you from living on the edge of nervous anxiety and so interfering in a wrong way in others' lives. Instead you can lead the quiet life of peace and poise that comes from knowing the gospel.

But the second counterfeit of love is ***laziness and cultivating a wrong dependence***. Verse 11 again, 'but we urge you, brothers,… to work with your hands, as we instructed you.' So it seems that some of these new Christians had decided that maybe it was unspiritual or unnecessary to work if Jesus was coming back soon, and instead had been happy to take from others.

Now Paul is clearly not criticising the unemployed, who want to work, but can't. And he's not criticising stay at home mums, or the retired, or the sick. The guys in his sights are those who could work but who don't want to, and instead live off the charity of wealthier Christians. But of course, the expectation that one day Jesus is going to return is not an incentive to *stop* working, it's an incentive to work hard and for his glory, because the day he returns will be the day we give an account for what he has given us to do with our lives.

And yet on the surface, if you looked at that church in Thessalonica, or at a church today, and saw someone who was doing well for themselves financially, supporting someone who was choosing not to work, you might think, 'what a great example of this brotherly love in action!' And yet that very scenario undermines the brotherly love Paul is calling them and us to.

You see, if these guys don't want to work, but instead want the well-off in the church to bankroll them, whose friendship are they going to cultivate? It's not going to be the guy who's just about scraping a living together is it? It's unlikely to be the foreign student who has nothing to give them. They won't be interested in them, instead they'll gravitate to the wealthy. And so whilst on the surface this giving/taking relationship seems like it's motivated by love, in reality it undermines the very kind of love that should mark a church – a love that has nothing to do with how much you earn.

But there's another reason why Paul sees things very differently.

**Why Getting Love Right Matters**

And Paul gives two reasons why minding your own affairs and providing for yourself financially matter: verse 12, 'so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.' So that means that when you and I choose to live in ways that please God, it's going to impact the way we relate to those outside the church.

And it's not hard to see how that might work is it? I mean, you don't need to have watched too many soap-operas to know that there's a kind of Christian who is known for being a gossip and a busybody, and it kills their Christian example. But a community that genuinely loves one another as family cannot help but win the respect of those outside it. Because in a dog eat dog world, the love of Jesus is increasingly rare, and increasingly attractive. And you and I get to be a part of building just such a community.

So, is the reputation of others safe in your hands? Do you leave people thinking better or worse of someone after you've talked about them? You see, when you know, I mean really know, that Jesus has treated you, and speaks of you, way better than you deserve, it sure could change the way we speak of others, couldn't it?

But the second reason Paul gives as to why getting love right matters is so that we won't be dependent on others. Now what has that got to do with you guys? Because there aren't many of you who could be accused of being lazy or unproductive, are there?

Well, ask yourself, why do you work in the first place? And you could answer that at all sorts of levels, couldn't you: you image God as *the* worker, *the* creator; you use the gifts he has given you for good; you provide for your family. But to understand what Paul's driving at here in Thessalonians, listen to what he writes to the Ephesians: 'Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labour, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need' (Eph 4:28). You see, one of the fundamental reasons that you and I are to work is so that we can support the needy. The genuinely needy.

So if a Christian could work, but is choosing not to, it means there is one less person earning money, and giving money, to ease others' genuine financial suffering, or to support the persecuted church, or fund mission and outreach to those outside the church.

So when you know the love of God for you in Christ, you won't gossip or meddle in others' lives, instead you'll love those around you. And when you know that Jesus gave himself for you, you won't turn your back on the world or on the world of work, and you won't hold on to your money for yourself alone. But you'll work hard so that you might have money to give away, so that others might come to know God's love and provision for them, the way you have come to know it for yourself.