

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12 (1984 NIV) ***Winning the Respect of Outsiders***

Introduction

In a small country village in Sicily, there were two brothers, renowned members of the local Mafia. They were mean, bad and very rich. But no one had a good word to say about them.

One day, one of the brothers, Luigi, died. The surviving brother, Jo, wanted something nice to be said about his brother at the funeral.

So he went to the local vicar and said, "I know that folks in the village hate us. However, I want you to say something nice about Luigi at his funeral. You do that and I'll give a generous donation towards the repair of the church. If you don't, you know my reputation."

The vicar thought for a while and then agreed.

A week later, the whole village turned out for the funeral and everyone wondered what the vicar would say.

After the opening hymn had been sung and the Scripture had been read, the vicar climbed up into the pulpit and delivered his sermon.

Eyeing the brother, sitting in the front row, the vicar said how evil the pair of them had been. He went on to say how Luigi had cheated, not only in business but on his wife; how he had lied; how he had had no concern for anyone but himself.

After some time preaching in this tone, the vicar ended his sermon with these words, "But compared to his brother, Jo, Luigi was a saint."

People want to be known, respected and remembered as someone with a good reputation. They do different things to get it—earn to get it, demand to get it, threaten to get it, bribe to get it, and even cheat to get it.

In our text today, Paul talks about how Christians are to build up a reputation that will win the respect of others.

How can Christians build up a reputation that will win the respect of others? Paul gives two exhortations today.

I. Be an example of brotherly love (vv. 9-10).

Now about brotherly love 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 the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more.

Paul begins by reminding the Thessalonians of their duty to practice brotherly love. The word for “brotherly love” is the word “philadelphia”. It’s a word used often outside the New Testament to refer to the love of family members for one another. It comes from two words that have been joined together:

- “Philos” which means “tender affection”.
- “Adelphos” which literally means “one born of the same womb”.

So the word “philadelphia” literally means “tender affection owed to those born from the same womb”. It’s easy to understand why the early Christians adopted this word to describe Christian love. To be born again means to receive new life through personal faith in Jesus Christ. All Christians have been “born of the same womb” through the new birth in Jesus Christ. Because of this, there is a spiritual bond between Christians that time and distance cannot break.

Paul elaborates on three things about this brotherly love:

- One, it is taught to us by God Himself. “For you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other.” The word translated “taught by God” appears only here in the whole New Testament (“hapax legomenon”). It speaks not of a lesson learned in a classroom but of a truth learned through a relationship. You learn to love your brothers by associating with them in actual relationships. Christians are bound together in a relationship of love as God’s children in God’s family.
- Two, it reaches out to love all of God’s children. “And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia.” Note that phrase—“all the brothers”. That’s not easy to do. Most of us love some of the brothers, maybe even most of the brothers. But all of them? That’s tough.

Let us be clear about this. We are to love all true believers everywhere. That’s hard because we all have our own prejudices. We don’t like this group or that denomination. We may even distrust people who have a different worship style or prayer style from us. Maybe we have some preferences regarding ethnic or social background. But God’s kingdom embraces all true believers no matter who they are or what church they belong to.

- Three, it should always be increasing in our lives. “Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more.” What does it mean that our love should increase? It means that we should increase in our ...
 - Sympathy for those in need.
 - Patience for those who are struggling to keep up.
 - Tolerance for those with whom we disagree.

If Christians are God’s children in His family, we then owe it to the watching world to practice brotherly love to one another.

At no other time in the history of Christianity did love so characterize the entire church as it did in the first three centuries. And Roman society took note of that. Tertullian (an early church father) reported that the Romans would exclaim, “See how they love one another!”

The love of the early Christians wasn’t limited simply to their fellow believers. Christians also lovingly helped non-believers—the poor, the orphans, the elderly, the sick, the shipwrecked, even their persecutors. Jesus had said, “Love your enemies ... and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (Matt. 5:44). The early Christians accepted this statement as a command from their Lord, rather than as an ideal that couldn’t be actually practiced in real life.

The pagan world looked at that early Church and although they might not understand why there was a change in their ethical behaviour, they were amazed by it and often drawn to it.

This is also recognized by secular officials of Rome like Pliny the Younger. While Emperor Trajan was in power, Pliny wrote to him asking how he should deal with the people known as Christians in the mid to late second century. His letter is now a priceless document because in it Pliny states that besides the fact that the Christians refuse to worship Caesar as a god, they are law abiding, loving, and good citizens.

It’s no wonder that Christianity spread rapidly throughout the ancient world, even though there were few organized missionary or evangelism programmes. The love they practiced drew the attention of the world, just as Jesus said it would—“All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another” (John 13:35).

(https://depts.washington.edu/hrome/Authors/calaroni/Enterintotheunderground/pub_zbarticle_view_printable.html)

How does God help us grow in this area today? He does it by putting us in situations that challenge us to practice Christian love. He may even challenge

people with different and difficult personalities to practice Christian love to one another. He does it because one good way we learn to love one another is to relate with those who may seem unlovely to us. It happens between husbands and wives, parents and children, co-workers, neighbours, fellow students, and relatives.

How can we today express and work on brotherly love among us and even beyond us?

- Friendliness—show godly warmth and affection.
- Courtesy—show sincere appreciation and politeness.
- Hospitality—show grace and welcome to visitors in church or at home.
- Kindness—show empathy by understanding how others feel and caring how they feel.
- Sympathy—show genuine concern when others are going through difficulties.
- Help—show charity to those in need.

How can Christians build up a reputation that will win the respect of others? Paul gives a second exhortation today.

II. Be balanced in Christian living (vv. 11-12).

Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to 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.

In order to understand these verses you need to know that in Thessalonica there had been great excitement about the Lord's return. When he was with them, Paul had taught them about the imminent return of Christ. The word "imminent" means "at any moment".

Whenever people get excited about the Lord's return there are always those who take it to extremes. Throughout history there have been those who have set dates for the Second Coming of Christ. When people begin to believe those dates, they start doing strange things like selling all their possessions and going up on a mountain to wait for Christ to return.

If selling your possessions is an extreme action called by the Lord, I think the early Christians had set an example in Acts 2. They felt led by the Lord to sell their possessions, not to go up to the mountain with nothing and wait for His return, but to be able to give in brotherly love to those who were in need. That's radical, other-centred love in action—both then and now.

God calls us to be radically different from the world not by practicing extremes but balance in life.

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One time, there was a student whom I was asked to help when I was teaching at the Singapore Bible College. He had some problem with his mother at home. His father had died not too long ago from cancer. The mother became a Christian sometime during his period of illness.

After the death of his father, this young man insisted that the mother must go to church every Sunday in spite of her back problem which made it very difficult for her to walk from the bus stop to the church. But he would not allow his mother to miss church because he was afraid that his mother might become lukewarm in her faith.

When I visited their home, the mother poured her heart out to me about how she felt Christianity had made her life so miserable. She lamented that she felt forced to go to church every Sunday.

I then talked with this young man. I asked him, "What did Jesus do to the invalid at the pool in John 5?"

He answered, "Jesus healed him."

I asked again, "What did the invalid do after his healing?"

He answered, "He went to the temple to worship."

I then explained to him, "I understand your desire for your mother to go to church so that she can grow spiritually. But as it is, she feels forced by you to go rather than led by God to go. Even Jesus healed the invalid first before asking him to do anything else. I think it would be wise for you to first help your mother to see a doctor so that her back problem can be treated, even if it means she's not strong enough to be in church for a while. That will be a better testimony on your part so that when she is well enough to go to church with you, she will go with thanksgiving, and not with grieving and groaning in her heart."

I thank God that he heeded my advice and things at home began to improve.

This kind of thing has happened often—i.e. Christians who have mistaken their spiritual extremes for Christian devotion. In answer to that kind of extremes, Paul issues a strong call for balanced living. He calls us to be ambitious in doing three things—do them and do them until they become second nature in our lives.

- One, live a quiet life. The word "quiet" speaks of a state of restfulness—the cessation of work, the end of conflict, the peace after

warfare. Be ambitious, Paul says, to live quietly. We need these words because our ambition tends to make us nosily restless rather than quietly rested.

Eugene Peterson translates this phrase “lead a quiet life” with two words—“Stay calm”. It means to be less frantic and more settled in your life. Don’t be always restless for something better in life.

The newspapers reported the story of a Singaporean woman who had gone to Kuala Lumpur to have her nose fixed. It was just too big to her. She spent S\$6,500 for the procedure.

She developed a nose infection after that. Her nose became swollen and leaked pus. In fact, she continuously experienced pain in the teeth and nose, and breathing difficulties.

These side effects had also affected her self-esteem and she did not like to leave her house. Whenever she really needed to go out, she would wear a mask.

She lamented, “I just wanted to make my nose smaller, so the nose would be better looking ... Even simple activities, like breathing, are harder now ... I can’t sleep well at night and am suffering from high blood pressure.”

(*TNP*, 14 Nov. 2011)

Many people spend much time and money seeking for happiness when the answer is really to enjoy what God has already given us. Someone once said, “You will never be happy until you learn to enjoy what you already have.” And when you are frantic on the inside, you cannot be calm on the outside. We live in an age with little sense of stillness and restfulness.

Paul calls us to balance such extreme living with a “quiet life” rather than keep complaining about life.

- Two, mind your own business. This does not mean that Christianity advocates individualism—me and God and no one else. Otherwise, the teaching about showing brotherly love is contradictory. Christianity respects God-given individuality in the context of Christian community—me and God and others in the family of faith. So, the Bible does teach that we should watch out for the welfare of those around us. However, it is possible to end up telling others how to do their work and run their life in a meddlesome manner.

There are at least two things that make meddling distinct from caring. First, meddling violates the principle of individual liberty given to every Christian. Each of us will stand individually before God someday. Since you're not God, don't try to play God for someone else—let God be God, and let the other person exercise personal responsibility and accountability before Him. Second, those who meddle can spend so much time managing the lives of others that they neglect their own lives. You become an expert at seeing the grain of dust in your brother's eye while ignoring the log in your own eye.

- Three, work with your own hands. If you're looking for true welfare reform, it begins right here. Paul literally worked with his hands as a tentmaker whenever he could so that he could support himself while he preached the Gospel.

It's true that the upper classes of ancient Rome and Greece despised manual labour. That's why they owned so many slaves. They hated to work with their hands.

But Christianity brought in a new ethic based on personal responsibility and hard work. We should value work as a blessing, not a curse. To be able to work is indeed reason to thank and praise God.

Most of our life is spent in the workplace (or school). If we cannot be holy at our work (or school), it is useless to attempt being holy elsewhere. Someone has said, "It is a terrible thing for religious people to have nothing to do but be religious." It is the man who gets up in the morning and goes to his job and works all day in the marketplace, it is the woman who pursues her daily tasks at home and on the job with cheerfulness—these are the ones who make an impact for Christ in the world.

The daily impact of the Christian faith on the world is left by the life testimony of the Christian mechanic in his workshop, the Christian teacher in the classroom, the Christian secretary at the desk, the Christian nurse at the hospital, or the Christian accountant keeping the books.

This is where it all begins! Going to church means little if you are lazy on the job. See our daily work as a way to worship God. What you do on Monday is just as sacred in the eyes of the Lord as what you do in church on Sunday.

Christians impact their world when others see that they are not restless in their spirit, meddlesome in their relationships, and idle in their work. What difference will such a lifestyle make?

Verse 12 wraps up with some words about the impact this kind of lifestyle makes.

- One, you will win the respect of outsiders. Remember, you may be the only Bible someone will ever read. You may be the only Gospel someone will ever hear. You may be the only Christian someone will ever meet. What do people read, hear and see when they look at you?

Someone has said it this way, “The only way to show that Christianity is the best of all faiths is to show that it produces the best of all men.” When we Christians show that our faith makes us better workers, truer friends, better neighbours, and kinder people, then we are really preaching.

One day St. Francis of Assisi invited a young monk to join him on a trip into town to preach. The young monk was so honoured that he quickly accepted. All day long they walked through the streets, and rubbed shoulders and visited with hundreds of people.

At the end of the day, they headed back home. However, not even once had St. Francis talked to anyone about the Gospel. The young monk was disappointed, and said to St. Francis, “I thought we were going into town to preach?”

St. Francis responded, “My son, we have preached. We were preaching while we were walking. We were seen by many and our behaviour was closely watched. It is of no use to walk anywhere to preach unless we preach everywhere in our walk!”

Indeed, our lives are sermons that can either draw others daily to Jesus ... or push them away from him.

(<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/70977/evangelism-how-to-by-sermoncentral?ref=TextIllustrationSerps>)

- Two, you will not be dependent on others. There is a good kind of independence we should all strive for. It's the kind that comes from paying your bills on time every time so that you don't have to steal, borrow money, or run up a huge credit card debt. There is nothing wrong with accepting charity in time of need. But to come to depend on it and to think it is owed you ... that is wrong.

As God's children, we are called to be preachers of God's grace to people, not parasites of God's grace through people. The world does not owe us a living. But we do owe the world something because of what God has done in and through us in Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

What does the church owe the world?

- An example of brotherly love.
- An expression of balanced life—living quietly without being restless, minding our own business without being meddlesome, working with our own hands without being idle.

This is what we owe the world. This is what God expects us to show to the world.

We have received a call to godly ambition today—to build up a Christian reputation that will win the respect of others.

Let's then make it our ambition in life today to build up a Christian reputation that will win the respect of others and all for the glory of Christ. Amen!