

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

SERMON SERIES: Well done, good and faithful CHURCH

(studies in 1 Thessalonians)

A Sermon You Really Don't Need

Study #7

(1 Thessalonians 4:9-10)

Introduction: Nothing you don't already know...

Sometimes you already know. You don't need somebody else to tell you.

A friend starts to tell you a story - and you wave your arms to stop because she's already told you that story. Or a buddy begins a joke - and you give them the punch line to let them know that you already know. Or somebody warns you about a danger you already knew existed. Like product warnings on manufactured good and food items.

I came across a list this week of product warning labels. These warnings aren't really necessary, are they? I mean, don't we already know this stuff?

- On a toilet at a public sports facility in Ann Arbor, Michigan, this - "Recycled flush water unsafe for drinking."
- On a 13-inch wheel on a wheelbarrow - "Not intended for highway use."
- On the packaging for a Rowenta iron - "Do not iron clothes on body."
- The Dremel Electric Rotary Tool warns us "This product not intended for use as a dental drill."
- On the packaging for Zantac 75 we find this helpful warning, "Do not take if allergic to Zantac."

- And I love this one on the Auto-Shade Windshield Visor - Warning: Do not drive with sunshade in place.
- Or this on Tesco's Tiramisu dessert: (printed on bottom of the box) - Do not turn upside down.
- Instructions on the packaging for a muffin at a convenience store - "Remove wrapper, open mouth, insert muffin, eat."
- Can of black pepper - Instructions: Usage Known." (Thank You!)
- Infant's bathtub: "Do not throw baby out with bath water." (And, believe me, we could go on and on and on and on!)

You don't need those product warning labels. You don't need those instructions. Everybody knows that stuff. It goes without saying that pepper spray "may irritate eyes" and that you shouldn't allow your children to play in the dishwasher.

And you don't need this sermon, either. The apostle Paul said as much. He told his readers that they didn't need for him to write what he did.

And then he went ahead and wrote it anyway. And I'm going to go ahead and bring you this message anyway, too.

In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul writes, *[9] Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; [10] for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more.*

The apostle Paul recognized that Christians needed to love if they were going to live the way God wanted them to live. Churches need to love if they are going to function as God wants them to function. You need to love and so do I and so do we.

That recognition is what prompted Paul to write the words before us in 1 Thessalonians 4. And for the next few minutes you and I are going to think together about love.

Love's SUPREMACY (from 1 Corinthians 13)

The Nature of Love

SPEECH minus love

As a way of orienting to the theme for this morning, we are going to turn to Paul's best known writing on the subject. In 1 Corinthians 13, he wrote to a church that suffered from a love shortage about the supremacy of love.

And right off the bat, he weighs the value of love against the value of words. Words are important. People who speak well are often accorded respect and admiration. He asks that you and I imagine someone with great communication skills.

[1a] If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels...

Here is someone who communicates powerfully. He can wow crowds with rhetoric. He can persuade with argument. He can take an audience from laughter to tears and back again.

Or here is someone who speaks by way of supernatural inspiration - "*the tongues of angels.*" Here's the bottom line -

[1] If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong¹ or a clanging cymbal."

Someone gifted with the ability to speak in foreign languages by the power of the Holy Spirit (some in Corinth were gifted in this way), or who has the grace of silver-tongued eloquence, but who has no **love**, is just flapping his gums.

I'll get personal...

- If I step up on this platform on a Sunday morning (like today), stand behind this pulpit and present my message from Scripture with a polished eloquence that rings true;

¹ To be "a noisy gong" was a proverbial expression for an empty talker in the first century.

- If I preached passionately and accurately, with footnotes in the manuscript reflecting the latest scholarship;
- If my sermons are masterpieces of tight logic, irrefutable argument, and challenges to application - BUT my life is not marked by love - well, my sermons might benefit the church, but I myself would be the equivalent of 1604 at rush hour. Just a bunch of noise

Paul continues. Now, he wants us to think about someone gifted in other ways.

FAITH minus love

[2a] And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains

Here is a man or a woman who has a tremendous grasp of Christian truth. They understand the essence of the Trinity, make clear distinctions between supra- infra- and sub-lapsarianism, know the ins and outs of both Calvinism and Arminianism, and are able to expound Fundamental Evangelical Pre-Millennial Dispensationalism. This Christian KNOWS!

And, this Christian has faith! Not just the faith that brought her into a saving relationship with Jesus, but the spiritual gift of faith, a capacity to trust God for miraculous things - and then to see them actually happen!

This guy, this gal KNOWS and BELIEVES.

But in this passage Paul introduces us to a mathematical equation that reads:

Prophecy + Knowledge + Faith - Love = 0

[2] And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

If you are gifted with the capacity to trust God, and regularly pray prayers that would make others blush - for the salvation of individuals or the repentance of cities - and see God do it - but have not love, you are nothing.

We simply can't get around the problem of lovelessness. Paul says that without love, the most gifted, knowledgeable, faithful person in the world isn't worth squat!

Other gifts come to Paul's mind as he writes. He wants to be brief. But he also wants to cover all the bases.

BENEVOLENCE minus love

[3] And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

There is a beauty to philanthropy and benevolence. I'm impressed to see people like Bill Gates and Warren Buffet donate their billions to charity. I think that is great.²

I don't know what motivates these men to give what they give, and I'll assume the best of motives. But there is a way to give gifts lovelessly.

The very dynamic that makes the gift life-changing is gone when a gift is given absent love.

From time to time you may read in the classified ads something like the following: *1985 Buick, body good, tires good, sans motor.*"

In other words, it is a great car, except that it doesn't have an engine! That car won't take you anywhere. It'll look good sitting in your driveway, but don't expect it to take you to the grocery store when you need food.

That is what philanthropy is like without love. It misses the whole point and the heart of benevolence.

² Warren Buffet has donated or pledged to give over thirty billion dollars to the Gates Foundation, which invests 1.3 billion annually to alleviate poverty and disease and to provide education. Sadly, Buffet has said of his gift, "*There is more than one way to get to heaven, but this is a great way.*" Whatever else benevolence may do, it does NOT buy anyone into heaven. Let's pray for Mr. Buffet and for all those who believe that they can give their way into Heaven!

Paul says that LOVE is superior to eloquence, faith and prophecy, and philanthropy.

Then he gives us the most thorough and concise answer to the question, "*What is love?*" found anywhere in literature.

A Snapshot of Love

[4] Love is patient³ - The patient Christian feels the full weight of another's harmful intentions, understands full well *without denial* how bad it hurts that someone meant them harm, and in the face of that says, "*I can wait for God to right all wrongs.*"

...love is kind - Either through active hostility or a tired "taking for granted," kindnesses can become the kinds of things that "used" to happen (in a marriage or in a friendship). But the absence of kindness spells the death of an important aspect of love.

Love is...not jealous; love does not brag⁴ and is not arrogant - Comparing ourselves with other people leads invariably to either jealousy or arrogance. Each person we meet will in some ways excel what we do and in some ways be inferior to what we do. Love refuses to play the comparison game.

[5] does not act unbecomingly, it does not seek its own⁵ - When Paul says that love does not seek its own, he means that love seeks what is best for the other.

...is not provoked⁶ - A down-to-earth way to understand what Paul is saying is that love isn't "*touchy.*" The loving person doesn't take offense, doesn't fly into a rage at what may be said to him or done to him.

³ Another translation of "patient" is "long-suffering."

⁴ The standard Greek lexicon of the New Testament refers to the braggart as "a wind-bag."

⁵ Bible scholar Gordon Fee has said of this phrase, "*In some ways, this is the fullest expression of what Christian love is all about.*"

⁶ This is the same word the apostle used in Ephesians 5 when he told fathers to not "**provoke**" (exasperate) their children to wrath. The difference is that here in 1 Corinthians 13, people are acting toward you or me in ways that might exasperate us, and we are choosing to not be exasperated!

...*does not take into account a wrong suffered* - Where there is love, there is **forgiveness**. Of all the facets of the gem of love we are examining this morning, none of them looks as unreasonable as this. The call to forgive IS the most radical call in the New Testament.⁷

Love is strong. There is no moral mushiness to it! It rejoices with TRUTH! Love is not gullible, but it refuses to take someone failure as the last word on the subject - as Paul says in the wrap-up of his description of love. Love *“does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things; love never fails.”*

And what about that last phrase, *“love never fails”*? Well, Paul sure doesn't mean to offer a guarantee that if we are loving, things will turn out the way we want them to.

Faithful and loving witnesses to Christ get martyred; loving wives and husbands sometimes get ignored and taken for granted. Loving employees can unfairly be passed over for promotion.

I think that what Paul means is that love is **always** in season, **always** in style. Love will **always** be appropriate for the child of God.

There is never a situation when the believer will say, *“Love is not called for in this case.”*

⁷ When, while being crucified, Jesus said, *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,”* His purpose was not personal psychological liberation. He wanted to bless His enemies. So, when we love someone by forgiving them, it is for the benefit of THAT very person who has done us dirty. Sure, we may receive some emotional benefit from the act of forgiving - but the point of forgiving is to spread the grace we have received to another. Forgiveness says, *“I am perfectly forgiven by God for sins I have committed against Him. I will, therefore, stop keeping lists of wrongs others have committed against me, and act in the way most likely to draw them to repentance and to the Lord - I will forgive them.”*

It is true that at various times “LOVE” can take on different faces - gentle love, sacrificial love, tough love. But - will there ever be a time when you or I will conclude, *“You know, I think I should act unbecomingly here.”* Or *“I ought to be unkind and impatient.”* Or *“I should rejoice in unrighteousness today.”*?

NO!

And this 1 Corinthians 13 description is something Paul didn't even have to write about to the Thessalonians. Telling them the importance of love was as superfluous as reminding us to not use our microwave to dry our pets.

The Thessalonians knew how critical love was for their Christian experience, for life in the church, and for their witness to the world.

[9] Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you...

But, despite not needing to write about love, Paul did write to them about it.⁸ Right here!

Love's Instructor (1 Thessalonians 4:9-10a)

teachers

Evidently, when Paul and Silas and Timothy had been with these folks in Thessalonica, they spent a lot of time telling them about the importance of love. The apostles certainly knew how important love was.

And in fact, all of the New Testament authors grasped how important love is in the Body of Christ.

⁸ We may often say, “it goes without saying” to refer to some aspect of an item being discussed that is so well understood that it doesn't need to be stated explicitly.

The Apostle John mentions it over and over again in his first letter.

[1 John 3:17] But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?

[1 John 4:7] Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. [8] The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. [9] By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. [10] In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. [11] Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. [12] No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us.

The Apostle Peter wrote *[1 Peter 1:22] Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart.*

And Paul emphasized the need for loving relationships in the church not only in 1 Corinthians 13, but throughout his letters (see Ephesians 5:2; 1 Timothy 6:11; 2 Timothy 1:7). He even listed it first⁹ among the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5.

Biblically speaking, EVERYBODY GOT IT! All the writers of the New Testament bought the idea that love was essential and central to life in Christ.

But Paul explains that the reason he did not really need to talk much about love to the Thessalonians is NOT because he had covered the topic so thoroughly when he had been with them.

It was because they had another, far better Teacher, who regularly gave them instruction about the importance of love.

The TEACHER!

[9] Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another

It could be that Paul has in mind the words of Scripture when he mentions God as teacher, because God certainly speaks through His Word. Both the Old Testament as well as the New affirms the centrality of love.

And he might be referencing the life of Jesus - God in the flesh - who not only taught us to love but also showed us the way to love.

More likely, though, I think Paul is saying that God Himself is actively teaching each believer, instructing him or her in the grace of love and impressing on each believer the importance of love.

And this would be one of the principal ministries of the third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. The Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit is active in the life of the believer in many, many ways.

He **convicts** us of our need for Christ's salvation in the first place. Then, when we place our trust in Jesus, He is the One who **baptizes** us into the Body of Christ, so that we are united with every other Christian.

He **fills** us and **empowers** us for service. He provides each of us with special **gifts** so that we can each contribute to the ministry of the church.

And, as Paul says here, He personally **teaches each Christian TO LOVE**.¹⁰

It is He who is constantly **prompting** you to love. He is the One who **opens your eyes** to see where love is needed. He **convicts** you when you have not been loving and have passed up opportunities to love. It is the Spirit who gently **affirms** you when you have loved well.

⁹ Perhaps as the defining trait.

¹⁰ The Greek tells us that we are, literally God-taught to love.

The grace of love is so important that God has not left us on our own to figure it out. Through His active involvement in our lives, the Holy Spirit leads us deeper and deeper into the world of love.

All through our lives we are pupils in God's school of love. And together, this day, we PRAISE GOD for this ministry of the Spirit!

Now, as evidence of God's prompting the Thessalonians toward a life of love, Paul only had to point to the way they lived.

Evidence of the Teacher's Teaching

In Thessalonica

[9] Now as to the love of the brethren...[10] you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia

They had probably started to exhibit love when Paul had been there with them and had led them to faith. (It often happens that when someone tastes the love of God through faith in Jesus, they pass that love on to others.)

Then, not long after Paul had been forced to leave Thessalonica due to persecution, he had sent Timothy back to them to see how they were doing. Evidently, Timothy came back to Paul (who was in Corinth) with a glowing report that these young Christians were continuing to grow in love.

Look at those words in our passage and you'll see an expansiveness and inclusiveness to Paul's affirmation here. Twice he uses the word "***all.***"

The Thessalonians weren't allowing personality differences to get in the way of their loving ways. They weren't being selective in who they would love (and how many of us fall into that trap?!). Everybody in that church was loved.

They loved each other within the church (and just think of the ways in which that love might have been manifested in a first century context...) and even ventured out beyond the city limits to points beyond, throughout the whole region of Macedonia.

Paul would say that their love for each other in the church was an indication that God was teaching them. We'd say that whenever love flows in a church, it indicates that God is at work, teaching the grace of love.

Based on what I've seen around here lately, I'd say that as surely as God taught the Thessalonians, He has been teaching us, too.

At Northwest Community Church

Whenever you see:

- Adults and Teens putting together an AWANA program week in and week out;
- Adults serving Middle Schoolers and High Schoolers and Elementary kids year in and year out in Sunday School;
- Basketball Camp and Vacation Bible School serving children with dozens of volunteers every single year;
- Thousands of dollars flowing into a Benevolence Fund and groceries filling the shelves of the food closet to feed struggling families;
- Care Groups that lavish love on members in the good and the bad times;
- Phone calls getting made to people who hurt;
- Transportation provided for those who cannot drive;
- Meals being delivered to families in sickness and in crisis - you can mark it down with certainty that God is teaching love.

Every act of love you'll see here is an indication of the work of the Spirit of God. He is teaching us. And we are learning.

Not that we have arrived. Not by a long shot. There is still only imperfect love here. Lovelessness still lives here. And any lovelessness is an indication that we are not being sensitive to the ministry of the Holy Spirit as He prompts us to love.

And, as there was room to grow in love at Thessalonica, so there is room to grow in love here. That's why Paul included the zinger he does at the end of his "non-discussion" of love.

Excel Still More! (1 Thessalonians 4:10b)

[10b]...But we urge you, brethren, TO EXCEL¹¹ STILL MORE!

Maturing in Christ is more process than product. Life in Christ is not static, but dynamic. And at every point, Jesus' way provides us with countless opportunities for growth and change.

At times, the progress may seem to be snail's pace slow. Hurtful habits, problem thought patterns and destructive words retreat from our experience at the speed of a glacier.

But progress does come. Slowly, sure. But surely it comes.

And as we give thanks for progress made, we make it our aim to *“excel still more.”*

I doubt if there is anyone here today who would say, *“Well, I’ve got this ‘love’ thing figured out. Lovelessness is no longer a problem for me. I guess I’ll just go on to the next thing.”*

Those honest enough to look into a mirror will admit that they’ve got more to learn about love.

In fact, entering more deeply into a life of love is essentially what life in Christ is all about.

Individually, none of us has arrived. And, as a church we have not arrived. But, both individually and as a church, in Paul's words we want to add to what progress has been made and *“excel still more.”*

Here at Northwest, we are aiming to create a culture by the power of the Spirit where love thrives.

John tells us that perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18). Well, we long to see an environment where, because the current of LOVE is flowing with such strength, we are free to take risks and to ask for help.

¹¹ This is the third time we find the word “excel” in this letter (although it is translated *“abound”* in 3:12), and the term is characteristic of Paul's understanding of the Christian life.

Jesus showed the way by laying down His life for us. And we want Northwest Community Church to become a church where sacrificial love is just the way we are with each other.

Brothers and sisters, let us love one another!