

The Master's Mark

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

***My father's father (as at Eden's tree),
Believing sacrifice can countermand
The Righteous One's definitive decree,
Disdained and disobeyed the Lord's command
(That's why a flaming sword now guards the gate).
His righteousness was but a memory,
And soon his heart so festered, foul with hate,
The true anointed king was forced to flee.
That king now reigns but I still bear my shame.
Yet that Anointed One invited me
To eat with him, though lost and lone and lame.
Ah yes, the King who loves his enemy
Now bids me drink His wine and seek His face.
What greater proof need I of saving grace?***

There is no nice way to say it. The old lady was a bitter, foul mouthed bigot. All she really had in life was money.

Her family had long since moved as far away from her as they could. And neighbors were careful to avoid her.

So when age and infirmity made it impossible for her to live alone, she moved into the best nursing home she could find.

Any number of nurses tried to make the old lady comfortable. But few of them were willing to be abused more than a week or two.

Finally, one quiet woman came to stay. She was kind and compassionate, educated and efficient. So she should have been all the old lady could have wanted. But unlike all the other nurses, this woman was black. And that irritated the old lady like acid.

She never referred to the nurse as anything other than "that nigger." And that was just the beginning.

The old lady could not be satisfied. The food was too cold or came too late. The pillow was too hard or too hot, too soft or too small. The television was too low or too loud.

But there was one other difference between this nurse and all the others. This woman was a committed Christian.

And she remembered that her Savior said she was to love those who hate her. Even those who berate and abuse her.

So day after day, this kind, compassionate nurse turned a deaf ear to the old woman's abuse. Instead, she did everything she could to ease the old woman's pains. She prayed for the old lady, too.

The old woman's health became so fragile, the nurse started spending nights sitting in a chair beside her bed. Finally, one night, the nurse came to the old lady's room and found her weeping.

When the nurse asked her what was wrong, the old woman looked up at her through her tears.

“All my life,” she sobbed, “I’ve hated people like you. And you are the only one in all the world who really loves me.”

So just days before the old lady died, her nurse helped her pray and receive Jesus as her Savior and King.

Love and the Spirit

Our Savior said the kind of love that nurse demonstrated is the identifying mark of His disciples.

By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another. John 13:35

And love is the apostle’s subject here. With the fewest words possible, he reminded believers at Thessalonica about what He was sure they already knew.

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; Verse 9

That verse seems simple and straightforward. But it is complicated by the apostle’s choice of words.

In one short verse, he used two different words for love. *Love* of the brethren is a translation of the Greek word *phileo*.

And when Paul said those saints were taught by God to *love* one another, he used the word *agapao*.

So if we are to understand the apostle’s teaching, we need to understand what those two words mean.

We might think of them in terms of direction. *Phileo* begins with the object loved and flows to the one who loves.

That image reminds us that *Phileo* is a love that treasures someone or something because of its intrinsic value or virtue. *Phileo* is loving someone because we see something worth loving in them.

We can think of *agapao* as flowing in the opposite direction. This love begins in the person doing the loving and flows to the object that is loved.

That means this love is an act of the will. It pays no attention to the worth or worthiness of someone or something.

Agapao love simply chooses to treasure something. And it does so without even contemplating or considering its worth.

This is the love our Creator God has for sinful human beings. Our eternal Lord simply chooses to treasure us.

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. John 3:16-17

Our God sees every thing we do and hears every word we speak. He even reads the motives and meditations of our mind.

So He knows better than anyone else ever could that there is nothing in us worth loving. Although we are addicted and enslaved by sin, God chooses to love and treasure each of us.

In fact, *agapao* love is so strong in our sovereign Lord, He sent His Son to shed His blood and give His life for us.

And the Bible commands us to love God with that same love. We are to choose to love our Lord.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself. Luke 10:27

Our Savior added we not only are to love God. Christ also commanded us to love others with that same, sacrificial love. However, our love is not to be limited to a love of the will.

We see that when the apostle Paul closed his first letter to the troubled church at Corinth with a stern command.

If anyone does not love the Lord, let him be accursed. 1 Corinthians 16:22

The word *love* in that verse is not *agapao*. It is *phileo*. Yes, we are to choose to love the Lord Jesus.

But at the same time, we are to consider His great grace and contemplate His kindness and compassion. And when we see how perfect and precious the Lord Jesus is, we cannot help but love Him.

If we neither understand nor accept the inestimable value of God's beloved Son, we cannot and will not have *phileo* love for Him. We are strangers to His grace. And we stand condemned.

Paul did not take a great deal of time in this letter to teach the Thessalonians about love. He lit that fire within them before he left. All he had to do was rekindle to coals.

And as he did so, he reminded them that he is not the one who taught them to love one another. When God's Holy Spirit came to live within them, His love filled them to overflowing.

...the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. Romans 5:5

That is Paul's message. Love is not a virtue to be developed. It is a divine gift we are to both experience and exhibit.

Love and the Saints

Jesus often used the word *phileo*. He said hypocrites like the Pharisees *love* to pray in public so people will see and praise them.

He warned that we are not to *love* and treasure our parents or our children more than we *love* Him. And He said if we who trust in Him still belonged to this world, secular society would *love* us.

Paul wrote that Thessalonian Christians did not need any further instruction or admonition about *brotherly love*. That word was transliterated into English to name a city in Pennsylvania: Philadelphia. It combines *phileo* with a word for *brother*.

This is a love that looks at other Christians and sees how precious they are. Ah yes, some saints do stumble. Others are frail and faltering. Some are even proud and self-righteous.

But each and every person who trusts in Jesus has been weighed in God's eternal balances. And in His holy sight they are worth the body and blood of His beloved Son.

When we realize just how precious other believers are, we cannot help ourselves. We are compelled to love them.

But loving other believers is more than that. It is also a command our Lord left for us and an act of the will.

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. John 13:34

And the love Christ commands us to extend to other Christians is no ordinary love. It is a love like our Lord's.

That is the love Thessalonian saints had for one another. It was a love taught to them by the

Savior's Spirit within them.

That love was a sure sign they really had been redeemed and recreated, that they had been saved and sanctified by the life, death and resurrection of God's sinless Son.

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. 1 John 3:14

The apostle John wrote that the proof we really are saved is that we love other Christians. So if we do not love other believers, nothing else we might profess matters.

It does not matter what experiences we say we have had. It does not make any difference how pure and perfect our doctrine is. Neither does it matter if we have been baptized or not.

If we really are saved, our Savior's Spirit lives within us. And He so fills us with His love, we cannot help ourselves. We sincerely and genuinely love other believers.

But love is more than emotion. If love is genuine, it produces works of kindness and compassion, of mercy and love.

...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? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. 1 John 3:17-18

That is the kind of love the Thessalonians had. From Philippi to Corinth, people all over Macedonia knew those saints were filled with the Savior's love. They could see it in what those believers did.

...for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more, Verse 10

Thessalonian Christians lived out their love by practicing and performing it. Moved and motivated by love for their Lord and His people, they helped other saints in practical ways.

That is the kind of love we must have. If we do not, we do not really have Christ's love at all. And we still serve the darkness.

The Thessalonians teach us yet another lesson. They loved *all* of the believers in *all* of Macedonia.

They did not limit their love to a select few. Their love was not confined to their own clique or class, to their own doctrinal denomination or social set. And that is the way it must be with us.

If we love and live for the Lord Jesus, we are to love all other believers. We cannot look down upon any other saint.

Neither class nor culture is to matter. And we cannot cling to racial preferences and claim to be filled with the love of Christ.

Our Savior loves the least and the lowest, the dirty and the destitute every bit as much as He does those who foolishly believe they are clean and cultured. And we are to do the same.

We are to look upon every other saint as an equal. Just another forgiven sinner.

Love and Sinners

Earlier in this same letter, Paul described the love he prayed would bloom and grow in persecuted Christians at Thessalonica.

...may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also do for you; 1 Thessalonians 3:12

Those beleaguered believers were not only to love other Christians. They were also commanded to love all men.

And that lesson still stands. We are not only commanded to love other believers. We are also to love people who have never trusted in Jesus as their Savior and King.

And we are to love them sincerely and sacrificially. We are to love those who are still shackled by sin just like our Lord loved us before we came to Him to be forgiven and freed from sin.

And our Savior said that even includes people who persecute us.

I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. Luke 6:27-28

The apostle Paul added some suggestions to teach us how we can show love to people who are still strangers to our Savior's grace.

But the ways the great missionary suggested are not the ones we might expect.

...make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, Verse 11

It is important that Paul did not make leading a quiet life a hard and fast rule. Sometimes, it is not possible to be at peace with others. That was the apostle's message to believers at Rome.

If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Romans 12:18

Sometimes strife is unavoidable. But it is important to remember that we who are redeemed are not to be the cause of disagreements and division.

The world always watches Christians with a careful, critical eye. So we dare not be demanding or disagreeable. Rabble rousing does little to show our Lord's love to the lost.

Some of the saints at Thessalonica made a mistake that has been duplicated in almost every generation since. Just as every believer should, they looked eagerly for our Lord's return.

But in that expectant euphoria, they stopped working to earn a living. And that made them a laughing stock of the lost around them.

...attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need. Verses 11-12

A committed Christian ought to be the most reliable employee anyone could hope for. Those who are yet to place personal faith in Jesus Christ should see that His people are faithful on the job.

A homeless friend of mine has this very problem. While he is healthy, strong and intelligent, he simply refuses to work.

He claims to be a Christian. But no one who knows him is influenced to come to Christ. My friend's laziness speaks so loudly, they cannot hear his words of witness.

Paul focused his attention upon yet another problem that some of the saints at Thessalonica had. They were busybodies.

That is a problem that few Christians today consider a very serious sin. But the Bible places being a gossip and a meddler on the same plain as the darkest of all sins.

Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; 1 Peter 4:15

If we would shine our Savior's love to the lost, we must heed the apostle's command. We must mind our own business.

That command is not limited to our employment, either. It refers to every area of life.

Yes, we should, indeed we must, have concern and compassion for other people. But that does not mean we are to intrude into the private, personal decisions other people make.

It is inevitable. Sometimes, we will see someone making a decision that we are convinced is both unwise and unproductive. But we must resist the temptation to meddle in that person's life.

However, that does not mean we should never talk about other people's problems. Quite the

contrary, we should talk about them, and we should do so constantly and continually.
But only to God in prayer.