

## Whose We Are: Part Six Love for One Another

| Thessalonians 1.3 and 4.9-10 and selected verses

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In the 1920s and 1930s, when this country was caught in the grip of both the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, there were thousands of drifters and indigent workers who took to the rails and wandered across the country looking for food or for work.

### Drifters and Their Signs



Legend has it that they created a sort of written code to communicate to each other what sort of welcome they could expect when they knocked on someone's front door looking for food or work or a place to sleep.

### Examples of Hobo Signs

	Kind woman lives here; tell pitiful story
	Dishonest person lives here
	Ill-tempered man lives here
	free telephone

Symbols like these were drawn on barn sidings or fence posts or door frames with chalk or charcoal to tell others what they would encounter within

A kind woman lives here – tell a pitiful story  
 A dishonest person lives here  
 And ill-tempered man lives here

Others meant things like  
 Grumpy man lives here  
 Get cursed out here  
 Go around this house

A question for us this morning:

If someone were to do the equivalent of coming to our front door, whether our own individual front door or the front door of our church family, if they were to encounter us in our neighborhood or bump into us out in the community, what sort of sign would they leave scratched on our fence to tell others what they could expect when they encountered us?

What would it say about the sort of welcome they received and the posture of the heart they encountered in us?

What sort of reputation are we giving to God in this community?

From everything that I hear out in the community, a great one! A couple of weeks ago I had a wonderful conversation with a young woman at the Starbucks window.

She asked what I was doing that afternoon. That was the weekend of the women's retreat. I didn't tell her I was a pastor but I said something about how excited I was that some of the women of the church were going to get some time with my wife.

She asked what church and I told her Covenant. Her face lit up immediately with a huge smile:

Oh, I know so many people from Covenant. What a great group of people! Let me thing. Do you know the Halls?

Ethan, Katrina, and Jenna? I sure do know them. Aren't they awesome?

They are. I live near them and have gotten to them pretty well. Yeah, I know a bunch of people from there, and everybody I know from that church is great.

\* \* \*

This fall we're walking through the apostle Paul's letter to the church called Covenant in West Lafayette, Indiana. It's actually his letter to the church in Thessalonica, but there are so many places of common ground between the two churches that it really feels like he is writing to us, and nowhere is that more true than in the passage we are looking at today.

### **I Thessalonians 4.9-10**

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.

As we pointed out at the beginning of this sermon series, Paul focuses in this letter on two clusters of themes.

One collection of themes, which we'll pick up later, is everything he has to say about Christian identity – which we will find is of incredible relevance for us today.

### **The Three Christian Graces**



The other cluster, which we're focusing on now, during the first half of this series, zeroes in on what Paul has to say about the famous trio of Christian graces: faith, love, and hope – themes he comes back to in a number of his letters.

Paul mentions these three at the beginning of the letter in chapter one, and again in the middle of the letter in chapter three and then again at the end of the letter in chapter five.

Here's the line in chapter one where he introduces them.

### **I Thessalonians 1.3**

We remember before our God and Father – he means in his prayers and thanksgiving for them, he is giving God thanks for – your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

At this point in our series we are focusing on the second one of those – love – “your labor prompted by love” is how the NIV captures this.

There's a lot tucked into that short phrase that is worth our noticing before we go on to chapter four.

First of all, if you were wanting to affirm someone for being a loving person, and you were writing the phrase “the \_\_\_\_\_, the something, of love,” what would you put in to complete the phrase? Probably, because of the way we've been shaped to think about love by our culture, maybe something like “feeling” or “depth” or “heart”?

But in Scripture, love is an outlook and a choice, not a feeling. In fact, it often goes against our feelings. As Bob Goff captures in the title of his book, *Love Does*. It labors. It works hard. It exerts itself.

But even that doesn't fully capture the *feeling* of this word labor. It's actually from a word that describes being hit, taking a blow, which gets at the toil, the trouble, the deep cost of love.

The JB Philips translation says

Your love has meant hard work

And The Voice paraphrase speaks of

Your tireless toil of love

Here are some other ways we might capture what the verse is conveying. Paul is praising

the hits you've taken as you've sought to live a life of love

the trouble you've gone to, the troubles you've gone through, for the sake of love

your costly life of love

That leads to the other thing I want to remind you of in this passage. Some of you know that the New Testament was originally written in Greek, and in Greek there are several different words for love.

The one here is the same one that is used nine out of ten times in the New Testament. It's the word *agape*. I just want to remind you that inherent in this word is the idea that love costs. It means putting you first, even when it costs me, which it inevitably will.

Can you think of an example of a time when love cost you?

Thomas Keating gives one of the best simple definitions of biblical love I've seen.

*"Agape means self-giving love as opposed to self-seeking love."  
(Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit, p14)*

We spent quite a bit of time studying I Thessalonians both as a ministry staff and then also with the elders, and some of the insights that came out were so rich.

One of our elders said: "Living out any form of real love always involves a layer of sacrifice." He's exactly right, and that idea of sacrifice is carried in this word wherever it goes in the New Testament. Think of

## I John 3.16

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.

So really, whenever we run across the word “love” in the New Testament, unless there’s another modifier in front of it that shows it is one of the other words, it would be appropriate to add the word “sacrificial” in front of it.

The word *love* in our culture has come to mean everything and nothing. It’s amazing how saying “sacrificial love” instead of just “love” gives such uncomfortable clarity and substance to this word every time we encounter it in Scripture.

So Paul kicks off his letter by telling his dear brothers and sisters in Christ that he thanks God for their costly lives of sacrificial love.

If someone were looking in on your life, watching the way you relate to those God had placed around you, what might they see and thank God for? What words might they use to describe you?

You and I as fellow human beings are not exactly drawn to doing things that put us out, let alone are costly or sacrificial. Most of us are master pain avoiders, and we often steer towards or away from each other as a direct calculus of how much we think it might cost us.

So where does the ability to love in that sort of costly, self-sacrificial way come from?

Let’s hop down to that other passage we already read, and pick up the thread.

## I Thessalonians 4.9

Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you . . .

This is one of only seven times in the New Testament when *this* word is used for love. It’s the word *philadelphia*, which refers to the fondness, the affection, that you have for your sister or your brother as family members.

As we’ll come back to in the second half of this series, a huge part of our Christian identity is grounded in remembering that when God is our Father through faith in Christ, we are placed into a family of faith in which our fellow believers become our sisters and brothers. This is a family word Paul uses here, a word that speaks of the fondness we have for one another because we’re related.

I recently had a really moving conversation with a couple that is newish to Covenant. And the woman said something that really struck me. She essentially said, “We really don’t know very many people here. And maybe in the past, that would have been important to us, to find people we knew and something in common with so we could be comfortable and feel at home.

But what we have found here is a sense of a deep connection and even of fondness for people we don’t know, yet, but we already share the most important thing of all, which is our common allegiance to Jesus as King.” I love that.

And that’s exactly what Paul is talking about at the beginning of this verse.

And Paul says there’s nothing he needs to teach them about that. Not why it’s important. Not how to do it.

Why? He gives us two reasons.

### **I Thessalonians 4.9**

for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other.

First, he doesn’t need to teach them about love because they already know about love. They’ve already *been* taught.

And here Paul shifts to the other more common word for love, the wider word, *agape*.

In what sense were they taught about love by God? It doesn’t mean that Paul *didn’t* teach them about love. Clearly when you read the letter to the Thessalonians and the book of Acts, Paul and his team were constantly teaching them during the time they were together.

Paul is talking about something deeper than imparting content. He is talking about how their hearts got formed to reflect the heart of God, and how their wills and desires were recalibrated and brought into line with the heart of God, and how his posture of love got formed in them to the point that sacrificial love was something they *wanted* to do and, more and more, God helping them, were *able* to do.

That is no human work. Paul and Silas and Timothy didn’t bring that about. That’s the work of God, as Paul makes clear when he lists love as the very first fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5.22, and when he says in Romans 5.5:

God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

Our being bent in upon ourselves is something that none of us can cure, and our opening our lives up toward God and out toward others is something that none of us can bring about. That’s the work of God.

Our becoming loving people is *God's* work in us with which we are called to *cooperate* with everything we have.

Which should sound familiar from our messages on the theme of faith a few weeks back, when we talked about how it is the Spirit of God who brings us alive to God, leading us to give our lives over completely to God, and it is the Spirit of God who then sets about forming the likeness of Jesus in us – it's what makes that all so pivotal and important.

The Christian life is not the life I live for God. It is the life God lives in and through me by his Spirit, with which I cooperate with the whole of my being.

What does your yes to God look like? How do you fling open the doors of your heart to him each day? How do you put the whole of yourself within reach of his consuming transforming fire?

Here's the second reason Paul says he doesn't need to teach them about love. Not only do they already *know about* it. They already *do* it.

### **I Thessalonians 4.10**

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.

Paul praises the Thessalonians for the ways they love their brothers and sisters in Christ all through the region.

And in the Greek it says "do love," not "feel love." Twice. This reinforces the consistent biblical perspective that love is an *outlook* we have – you as someone created in God's image are worthy of my regard regardless of who you are – and it is a choice we make, it is something we *do* – not something we feel, not in the same category as "liking" someone. Rightly understood, we realize it doesn't have much at all to do with that.

Macedonia was a large region. It stretched past Philippi to the east and it reached beyond Berea to the west. What might it have looked like for the Thessalonians to do this – to "do love" to their fellow followers of Christ spread across a wide region?

Paul doesn't tell us, but from this and other letters of his I think we're safe concluding that it would have revolved around three New Testament words for love, two of which we've already touched on.

### **How did the Thessalonians "do love"?**

1. First, when they ran into each other out in the community, at the harbor, in the marketplace, in their gatherings for worship, would have shown the brotherly and



sisterly affection Paul talked about at the beginning of verse 9, which he said they already knew how to do so well.. They would have brought open hearts to each other, and formed relationships of genuine affection with one other, treating each other with the fondness of family.

I'll never forget one time when Sharon and I were getting together with a couple we know well. When we got to their house and rang the doorbell, she immediately put down what she was working on in the kitchen ran all the way from the other end of the house to give us a huge hug of welcome.

It's the same word Paul used in

### **Romans 12.10**

Be devoted to one another in love.

How open are you in your expression of affection for your brothers and sisters in the Covenant family?

### **How did the Thessalonians “do love”?**

2. Well, second, as their relationships grew, they would have opened not only their hearts but their homes, extending a welcome to the believing community in order to encourage each other and build each other up in the faith.

Two main New Testament words capture the idea of hospitality.

One, the word we find in Romans 15.5-7, is familiar to us from an earlier message.

### Romans 15.5-7

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

It's translated “accept, welcome, receive, or extend hospitality.” This word is formed from two other words that mean move toward the other person and draw them toward you. The biblical opposite of the word *accept* is the word *reject*, which means pulling back from the other person, and pushing them away.

Another key word for hospitality in the New Testament is the word we find in places like I Peter 4.9.

### I Peter 4.9

Practice hospitality with one another.

This word is also formed from two words: the word for “affection” and the word for “stranger.”

The stranger is anyone who is foreign to you, either because you don't know them yet, or because they are different from you. Maybe they come from a different culture or ethnicity or political ideology or social class.

So combining these ideas, hospitality is when we move toward a stranger, and draw them toward us, and in the process, transform them from strangers to friends.

How much do others experience you as moving toward them and drawing them in toward you with a heart of hospitality?

### **How did the Thessalonians “do love”?**

3. When they became aware of needs, and there were many needs surrounding them, they would have responded to those needs in sacrificial ways.

In II Corinthians 8.1-2 Paul says that many believers in the area of Macedonia were hit especially hard by economic struggles. There were earthquakes and famines throughout the wider region, and some might have struggled to find jobs or a place to live or even food to get them through.

This is where the Greek word *agape* comes back in.

In chapter one verse three Paul says to his brothers and sisters in Thessalonica: “You are living a costly and beautiful life of sacrificial love, I see the troubles you go through for the sake of each other.

And as your pastor I say to you, the Covenant family, how aware I am of *this* church's beautiful costly love for each other and for so many others as well. You are *christiform* people living *cruciform* lives. Christ-shaped people living cross-shaped lives of love.

“What a joy,” said one of our elders, “to be the offspring of the Lord's offered life, and to think that somehow relates to our relationships to one another as we build one another up in our faith.”

As I was preparing my sermon I started making a list of people from the church family whose lives of love have stood out to me and encouraged me recently, and I immediately filled more than a page, and I easily could have kept going. From where I sit, it seems like there are as many lives of love as there are people in this church family.

### **I Thessalonians 4.10**

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.

Having celebrated the beauty of their love for each other, Paul concludes the passage by urging them not to coast, not to let themselves think in terms of moving on to other things, not to become weary of loving, but to let their lives reflect the love of God only more and more and more.

Even Paul's admonition is an incredible encouragement to his brothers and sisters. He says, "Your love is already abundant to the point of overflowing. Just as you have, let that flow of love continue. Open your life to the Spirit of God, each day, and throughout each day, and let his love overflow from your life into the lives of others more and more."

I believe God's encouragement and his invitation to this church is the same as it was to the church in Thessalonica.

If you've been here for longer than a week or two you know that we believe God is teaching us how to live a life of love.

That was our conviction four years ago when God made it clear to us after a half year long discernment process, and it remains our conviction today. That wants us to be known for our love, and he is calling us to

Live a life of love.

Love Jesus.

Love His people.

And pour out His love on the world.

And I wonder if it may not be in these three areas specifically that God would have us grow in our love for each other:

In our open hearts, hearts of affection for one another as brothers and sisters in Christ

In our open homes, as we move toward each other and draw each other in, transforming each other from strangers into friends

And as we let God call us into places where our love will cost us, as love and serve each other, so that we might put the love of God on display in this world.

What might your yes to that invitation look like?

Covenant family, you love in such beautiful and moving and creative and costly ways. As God leads us and equips us and empowers us and encourages us, shining his love through us to one another and to this world, let's keep doing it, more and more!

**Benediction** (from I Thessalonians 1.4 and 3.12)

Brothers and sisters, you are chosen by God and dearly loved.  
May your love for Him, for one another, and for all others grow and overflow.