

The Kind of Love That Wins Respect • 1 Thessalonians 4:9–12

I once heard a radio interview of the best selling author who became famous on the premise that “Everything I Ever Needed To Know I Learned In Kindergarten.” He explained that the rules he learned in kindergarten – things like respecting the rights of others, putting things back where you find them and being kind to one another – would remedy the problems we have internationally as well as between individuals.

The conversation came around to the topic of Mother Theresa, the Roman Catholic nun who won the Nobel Prize for her care of the dying people in Calcutta, India. The author explained that he vehemently disagreed with Mother Teresa on the role of women in the Roman Catholic Church and especially about abortion. But then he added, “But I have enormous respect for that lady because she does it! No matter where she is, she cares for and loves those that nobody else cares about.” In other words, she has the kind of love that wins respect from other people.

That’s what St. Paul was talking about in 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12.

Now about brotherly love we do not need to write 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.

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.

These words were not limited in their target audience to just the first century Greeks.

They obviously are words for us as well, telling us the message to “*love more and more.*”

In these verses St. Paul gives three descriptions of the kind of love that wins the respect of others. His first description is in verse 9: Christian love is learned. Paul understands that none of us is born with an intuitive understanding of Christian love nor with the inclination to do it. The fact is, we are born as sinners who are selfishly bent so that even when we do things that are seemingly loving and kind, often it is with an agenda that is rooted in our own priorities rather than in the needs of others or in the example of Jesus Christ. Even when a person becomes a Christian and the old

sin nature is replaced by a new nature, it doesn’t mean that person knows how to love any better. Becoming a Christian may give us a new desire

and a new inclination to love as Jesus Christ loved, but we still need to learn how to do it.

Look again at verse 9: “*Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other.*” Christian love is taught by God from the inside out. No pastor can stand in the pulpit, nor parent at home, nor Sunday school teacher in a classroom and teach somebody how to really love as Jesus Christ. They may be able to be model God’s love but the real teaching is something that God does inside of a person. In fact, only God can do it because our natural inclination is to love others primarily on the basis of their appearance, their behavior and their relationship to us. Christian love is learned when we are transformed by God to see others as God sees them and then to love them as God loves them. God teaches us to love by choice regardless of the way people look or behave. It is a choice to behave toward an-

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other person in a way that is in that person's best interest.

We need to be learners! If we are going to be like Jesus Christ in loving one another and then in loving those who are not Christians, then we need to learn how to do it. I obviously cannot speak for you, but I can tell you about me. In all honesty, I really want to be a lover like Jesus Christ. I have a very deep desire to love as he does, but I often don't know how. There are times when I really try to love other people but instead end up hurting them. There are times when I seek to speak words of kindness and they come out wrong and are completely misunderstood. I struggle with dilemmas where every choice seems to be wrong.

I'm not smart enough or good enough to love like Jesus, so I need God to teach me. It's the only way. I need to go to the schoolhouse of God's love every morning like a first grader and sit there and listen. I need God to stand in front of me and explain to me that this is the way to love today. And then from that classroom experience I go back out on the playground and back home and live out what I have been taught because I never could have figured it out myself. Sometimes I discover that the lessons that I was taught yesterday are lessons that somehow don't quite fit today. And so I need to go back to school, not just five days of the week, but all seven, holidays included, every day being taught by God what it is like to love as Jesus loves. Every day I must learn because Christian love is learned from God on the inside before it ever gets done on the outside.

Who are the recipients of this love that you and I are to learn from God? The Greek word used in verse 9 is *philadelphia* which means "brotherly love." In secular Greek this word is always used to refer to the affectionate relationship between two birth-brothers. It is St. Paul who christens the word with a Christian meaning, using it to refer to the love that Christians are to have for one another. The lessons that

God is teaching us on the inside are then to be primarily, although not exclusively, lived on the outside with those who are fellow Christians. Sometimes we don't do it that way. Sometimes we don't treat other Christians with love.

Someone told me a bit of Canadian history that was quite unknown to me, a story about the Battle of Quebec. The British were seeking to take the city back from the French and on the eve of the battle the British general gave instructions for some target practice in preparation. He pointed to the statues of saints around the top of the cathedral of the fortified city of Quebec. Just before dark the cannons were aimed and the statues were blasted off the cathedral. The next day they readied themselves for the battle, only to discover that they had used all their ammunition the night before, shooting the saints. As a result, if you visited Quebec, you will notice it is still a French-speaking city!

May that never be true of us! Let us not shoot one another. Let's love the saints and save our shots for the enemy. We are to have brotherly love for our fellow-Christians.

The second description of the kind of love that wins respect is in verse 10. It is the little two-letter English word "do" and it appears twice in this verse: "*And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more.*" It tells us that love, Christian love, is primarily something that is done. Christian love is far more than something that we feel. In fact, there may be persons that we don't feel much like loving, maybe don't even particularly like, and yet we are to "do love" to them.

In some ways this is harder and in some ways easier. It's easier to control our behavior than our feelings. We can choose to be kind, to act in the best interests of another. But it is harder when the person we are trying to be kind to is unkind, or when the person to whom we are generous takes advantage of us or the one to whom we are gracious is mean. The Chris-

tian love that is portrayed in the New Testament is love that is shown toward others whether we have emotional affection for them or not, love that is independent of the person's appearance, behavior or relationship with us.

That is precisely what Jesus did. He healed people who never said thanks. He took Judas into his inner circle of disciples, knowing in advance that Judas would betray him; yet he loved him nonetheless. Jesus died on the cross for the people who hammered the nails into his hands and feet and put him up there to die. Jesus "did love" and love is what God teaches us to do.

Are you doing love? Many of you are, I know. But St. Paul's message to the Thessalonians applies to us as well. He commended them for their love and urged them to keep on doing it "more and more" because Christian love is doing.

The third description of the kind of love that wins respect is in verses 11 and 12 of 1 Thessalonians 4. To understand it, we need some background. The people in Thessalonica had only partial teaching concerning the second coming of Jesus Christ. They thought it was going to happen right away. Some of the Thessalonians got so caught up in this teaching that they quit their jobs and, when the predicted dates passed, they came up with some later date. The people who were not working but just sitting around waiting for Jesus' return became dependent on other Christians. They failed in their basic Christian responsibility to work and support their families and to win respect for Christ in their work and business dealings. Throughout history this sort of thing has happened, dates for the second coming of Jesus are predicted and people quit their jobs and gather to wait for his return.

It was in this situation that St. Paul wrote these words:

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 (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12).

This is a powerful truth for us today! The Bible is here telling us that the kind of lives we live – especially at our jobs — are really our preparation for the return of Jesus Christ. We are to have jobs, and our behavior in our employment is to be an outworking of what Christian love is all about. In other words, God calls us to live simple, straightforward lives of hard work, honest relationships, personal integrity and quiet consistent love. It is in these activities that we best love God and one another.

I conclude with two stories. Story number one comes from the early days of New England. In that generation many thought that the end of the world was soon to take place and the return of Jesus Christ was about to happen. A man named Paterson Smyth wrote of "a day during one of those times of excited expectancy of the end of the world when a sudden darkness at noon interrupted the session of the (legislative) Assembly. Some cried fearfully, 'It is the coming of Christ: it is the end of the world.' But the old President ordered lights to be produced: 'Bring in candles,' he said, 'and get on with your work. If the Lord is coming, how better can He find us than quietly doing our duty?'"¹

The point of this story is simple. The best way to love others and the best way to live for Jesus Christ is to live love — and our work, what we do on an ongoing basis, is high on the list of the ways love is lived!

The second story is a lot more recent. The way I heard it, the pastor of a church started having children's sermons each Sunday morning as part of the worship service as a way to better interest the

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children. Week after week he called the children to the front of the sanctuary for a sermon just for them — even the adults seemed to like them a lot better than the regular sermons. On this particular Sunday he told the children, “I’m thinking of something that is all furry and has a big bushy tail and sort of buck teeth. It scampers along the ground, climbs up trees and eats nuts. Who knows what I’m thinking of?”

A little girl with no front teeth raised her hand and said very carefully, as though she were really thinking it through, “It sounds like a squirrel — but it’s probably Jesus.”

The point of this story is also simple. That little girl knew that week after week every one of the pastor’s stories always ended up related to Jesus.

And that’s the way we are to love and live and work. Everything we say and do should make those around us think of Jesus. That’s the kind of love that wins respect! Learn it, do it and live it more and more and more and more!

¹ Leon Morris, The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians, NICNT, p. 133

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