

Prayers

To God

How can we praise You enough, Lord God?
We are amazed at Your love and Your forgiveness of all our sins;
We are overwhelmed by the gracious help of Your Spirit at all times;
We are astounded by the vision of Glory given us within Your Word;
We are blown away by our sure inheritance of the Kingdom of God!
We worship You, Lord God! Father, Son and Holy Spirit:

AMEN

For myself

Weekly theme: Food and eating

Pray about how much food you eat; is it too little or too much? God will know and have an opinion! Seek His wisdom.

For others

Pray for those still affected by the use of drugs in sport. As the world moves on from the 'Armstrong' affair, pray that people of good intent and godliness will expose cheats and frauds throughout competitive sport and athletics.

Meditation

The Saviour does all this:
For He loves the people He has made.

He heals the heart,
And releases the soul to claim its liberty.

He heals the body
And breaks the bondages of oppression.

He speaks into the mind
And liberates imagination and intelligence.

He speaks to the soul
And removes the barriers to human potential.

He guides all our actions

And opens the concealed avenues of fulfilment.

He guides our feelings,
And cherishes the possibilities of genuine love.

This is what the Saviour does
He does not condemn, but He brings salvation!

Bible Passage

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

⁹ Now concerning the love of the fellow believers, there is no need for anyone to write to you, for you have been taught by God yourselves, to love one another. ¹⁰ You do indeed love all the believers throughout Macedonia, but we urge you, fellow believers, to do so more and more. ¹¹ Make it your ambition to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, just as we instructed you, ¹² so that you may conduct yourselves properly toward outsiders and have no dependency on anyone.

Review

On the surface, the sentiments expressed within this part of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians are straightforward. He commends the fellowship and affection they have already shown to one another and have become noted for within that region of Macedonia (4:9) for this quality of faith. Paul encourages the church to pursue these things '*more and more*' (4:10). However, if we thought that this love for one another was intended to be gregarious or perhaps evangelistic in nature, then we are mistaken. Paul concludes his advice here with advice to '*live quietly, mind your own affairs ...*', and '*have no dependency on anyone!*' (4:11). Quite literally, Paul uses an expression in the Greek of verse 11 that could in some circumstances be translated as '*mind your own business!*'

It is of course possible to take any part of this passage and find a spiritual message with it. For example, the first part of it is yet another Biblical passage that uses the famous phrase '*love one another*' (4:9), one of the few phrases that comes from the lips of Jesus (e.g. John 13:34, 15:12,17). It is a message that crops up repeatedly in the writings of Paul, and also the letters of Peter and John. As one of Jesus' personal commands, spoken to the disciples towards the end of His ministry, it was surely bound to influence the life of the early church. Paul therefore emphasises to the Thessalonians their duty to keep Jesus' command '*more and more*' (4:10).

By writing this, Paul challenges all of us who read his letter to do the same. If the Thessalonians were asked to do this, and they were no slackers (4:11), how much more should we feel the call to '*love one another*' with greater zeal. This is a pertinent call to all God's people today, amongst whom there is sometimes the most awful division, scandal and acrimony. These things need to be overcome with good purpose and intent on all sides, for no other reasons than the fact that Jesus asked it of us.

Going Deeper

The founding of Thessalonica and its character.

However, there is something lying even deeper within this Scripture, which is worthy of our attention, and we will only discover it if we look carefully at the circumstances Paul is describing. Thessalonica was a proud and independent city, founded by no less a person than Alexander the Great. Alexander was the man who united the Greek states in an empire that was based on military might but was also radically new in world history. It sought to export a culture of tolerance and stability rather than mere military might, and although the great man Alexander the great died young, the generals of his army who ruled the world after he died created a system of governance in the ancient world that was the basis of much we assume today, like the concept of the state, the place of learning and language as a unifying factor amongst peoples, and much more.

Thessalonica had a glorious history, but centuries after Alexander, it had become a major centre for the Roman Empire, and the city was the effective capital of the province of Macedonia. This was a title it held in preference to its neighbouring and competing city of Philippi. The fact that we have a letter from Paul to the Philippians, and records in Acts of Paul's missionary work there indicates the great importance to the ancient world of these two important cities. There is however one more feature of first century life in that part of the world we should bear in mind. Large cities like this were the life-blood of smaller communities which depended on them for trade; more than this, there is some indication that as small Christian communities sprung up in surrounding towns and villages, they became dependent upon the larger and richer Christians in the cities. They would generally have greater resources for the early church especially at times of trouble and persecution.

The importance and witness of hospitality

With all this in mind, Paul's first few comments in this passage are clearly designed to encourage the Thessalonians to grow into the type of church that could do the work of a Christian community in a large town. Paul perceived that it was important that this church community cultivated the generosity of hospitality and were loving towards all, irrespective of their background. This would be a good witness within Macedonia, and beyond.

Some reckon that that the Christian community of Berea (see Acts 17:10,13, to where Paul fled after escaping Thessalonica) was a church community in need of such generosity from the church at Thessalonica. They too had helped Paul on his way and although the fellowship of faith was maintained on such apparently thin grounds as hospitality and friendship, it was a foundation upon which the Holy Spirit could and would build (4:10).

Further instructions

However, Paul was ever mindful of the human tendency to fall into sinful ways, and in verses 11 and 12, he gave them some advice that is rather different to what we read from Paul elsewhere, so we do not necessarily spot either its existence or its distinctiveness.

Paul urged the Thessalonians to be quiet and careful in their witness and work as a new Christian community, saying '*mind you own affairs*' (4:11), and '*work with your hands*' (4:11). With these words, Paul was asking these Christians to do something that did not come naturally. Most of the Thessalonians were influential people, as befits a city of class. They were used to being generous, and probably enjoyed the reputation that came with this; but Paul told them not to parade their wealth and influence and to pursue their work and interests carefully and with caution.

The Thessalonian church were not materially dependent upon other Christians, but potentially, theirs was a ungodly dependency on status and approval from others. He did not want the Thessalonians to become a Christian community that paraded its beneficence. The godly way for the rich was to learn the lessons of being meek and self sufficient; advice Paul may well have given to other churches (see Phil 2:3, Col 3:13).

Building the wider church

This is all very interesting, because Paul was not merely founding individual churches, he was seeking to establish principles by which they churches could relate to each other, and together make up the '*body of Christ*' (Rom 7:4, 1 Cor 10:16 etc.). This could only be done on the basis of equality, and whilst churches were not equal in worldly social status, they were equal in the sight of God, and this had to be demonstrated. Paul's advice was given on the basis that all God's churches should relate to each other with spiritual equality, and without any sense of dependency.

If the church developed in any other way, then its leaders would be guilty of allowing the world's agenda to break in to what God was doing to establish His church in the first century AD. This passage is only a small part of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, but it is nevertheless important, and we can find traces of its teaching in other letters. Tomorrow, we will see Paul change what he has and begin to give the Thessalonians some firm teaching about one important matter. But this one small thing came first.

Discipleship

Application

Small and large churches

Throughout the world today, churches are growing at a considerable rate. In some places the churches are large, thousands go to one arena for worship and leaders struggle to get to know individual people and help them follow appropriate pathways of discipleship. In other places, small congregations meet faithfully over generations and if just one other family joins them per decade, this is enough for them to keep going both practically and financially to maintain their witness in the community for another generation!

So many churches today are proud of their independence; they say they are God's people in this or that place, when in reality there are Christians everywhere, worshipping in churches that are divided and only see themselves, not the whole picture of the Kingdom of God. ! Paul's vision linked all churches, large and small, in mutual responsibility and he linked them on the principle of hospitality and Jesus' command to all His followers to '*love one another*'!

The messages of history

Much of the Bible study today has been a look at history. When I was younger I thought history had little to teach us. Now I am older I see that it can be the means whereby God can teach us the most potent lessons we will ever learn. But we need to keep our eyes and our hearts and ears open, and too many Christians I have talked to have already discounted the value of anything said or done after Christ's death until the year before last!

The letters of Paul and the other documents of the early church included in Scripture are an immensely important part of Scripture. Just as the prophets of the Old Testament help the Christian to understand the rest of Old Testament Scripture, so the Acts of the Apostles and

the letter of Paul help us interpret the teachings of Jesus as they were increasingly applied to real life Christians in the first century AD. Their testimony is invaluable.

Ideas for what to do

- Is it possible that you have been presumptive in your generosity, perhaps in giving a gift, and assuming that you will be rewarded for so doing? Read through this passage again and assess where you stand within what it says about the Thessalonians.
- Pray for the church today and its many divisions and sometime difficult attitudes towards the beliefs and practices of other churches. Pray for humility, and an acceptance of each Christian fellowship on an equal basis.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. To what extent is 'love one another' demonstrated in the life of the church today, whether in your church or in others?
2. To what extent is it right for Christians to 'mind their own business' and seek to be non dependent?
3. How can the church behave properly towards outsiders today?

Final Prayer

Lord God, there is so much that we should prayerfully bring to You concerning our lives and all we do. Take us, we pray, and infuse Your Spirit into every part of our being. Sort out the wrong and bring to light the right, so that we may live and work according to Your Wisdom; and make our lives an offering of prayer to You; **AMEN**