

ORDINARY CHRISTIAN WORK

by Tim Challies

1 THESSALONIANS 4:9–12



...love one another, ...live quietly,
...mind your own affairs, ...work
with your hands..."

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul responds to questions he had received from the people of the church in Thessalonica. And apparently, one of the questions they asked the Apostle was something like this: How can we live lives that are pleasing to God (see 4:1–12)? They had been told of God’s creation mandate, that God created us and placed us on this earth so we could exercise dominion over it as His representatives. They had been told of Christ’s Great Commission, that His people are to take the gospel to the farthest corners of the earth, and as more and more people come out of darkness and into light, to train them in the things of the Lord.

This church knew those big-picture commands, but they found themselves looking to Paul for specific guidance. What does it look like for ordinary people in ordinary places and ordinary times to live out the creation mandate and the Great Commission? Does it require full-time ministry? Does it require moving to the far side of the globe? What is the life that is pleasing to God?

Paul’s response is fascinating and perfectly consistent with the doctrine of vocation. His response addresses three issues: sexual morality, the local church, and work.

LIFE UNDER CONTROL

*The first thing Paul tells this church is that if they want to live lives that are pleasing to God, they need to avoid sexual immorality and instead pursue sexual purity: “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor” (1 **Thessalonians 4:3**). The Thessalonians needed to reject the worldly counterfeits of sex and relationships to instead pursue godliness in those areas.*

LIFE IN COMMUNITY

The second thing Paul tells this church is that if they are to live lives that are pleasing to God, they need to commit to loving the people in their local churches: “You yourselves have been taught by God to love one another.... But we

urge you, brothers, to do this more and more” (vv. 9–10). While Christians are to extend love to all men without discrimination, they are to focus their love especially on the brothers and sisters in their local church.

LIFE AT WORK

Paul’s third point is especially important to ordinary Christian work. He tells these Christians to “aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one” (vv. 11–12). If the Bible was going to tell believers that full-time ministry was a better or higher calling, if it was going to tell us that the best Christians are the ones who sell all they own and move to the other side of the planet, this is exactly where we would expect to find it. But we do not. We find something altogether different.

In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul gives very simple instructions that transcend time, geography, and culture. He tells the Thessalonians to live quietly, to mind their own business, and to work with their hands. When he tells them to live quietly, he means for them to be content to be unknown and unnoticed. There is a paradox here: they are to work hard to be still, or to make it their ambition to be free from worldly ambition. They are to be content with their lot and to know that this contentment is how they can best honor God. When Paul tells them to mind their own business, he means for them to focus on their own work and to avoid being busybodies, who are busy with everything but what matters most. And when he tells them to work with their own hands, he means for them to carry on the work in which they are engaged, even (or especially) if that work involves manual labor. He could call them to all of this because their work had intrinsic value simply because it was their calling—their God-given vocation.

As far as we know, Paul was not writing to a group of brand-new Christians here. He was not giving them the basic instructions that would carry them through their early years, before they eventually graduated to better and more difficult things. This church appears to be strong and spiritually mature, and still Paul’s word to them is very simple: you bring honor and glory to God through your very ordinary lives.

LIFE ON MISSION

In case the instruction was not sufficient, and before he moves on to other matters, Paul explains the importance and the effect of doing these very simple things. He wants them to do this “so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one” (4:12). Here Paul shows that Christians live out God’s desires for them through their ordinary work and their ordinary lives. This quiet life, this life of minding one’s own business and working hard, allows them to carry out the Great Commission. After all, if they do these things—if they pursue sexual purity, if they love one another, and if they work hard—Paul assures them they will be walking properly before outsiders. Not only that, but they will be displaying love for their Christian brothers and sisters.

Let’s be clear: this is not a call to complacency or a call to a bare minimum. It is a call to be faithful right where we are and to know that God is pleased with His people when they live out their ordinary lives. There will be some who are called to full-time church ministry as their vocation. There will be some who will put aside manual labor in order to be trained and tasked as full-time pastors, dependent on the support of others.

There will be some who will stop working with their hands to go into the mission field. This is good, and it honors God. But it is not a higher call or a better call or a surer path to pleasing God. We please God—we thrill God—when we live as ordinary people in ordinary lives who use our ordinary circumstances to proclaim and live out an extraordinary gospel.¹



OPEN IT

- 1. What was your first job? What did you like/dislike about it? What did you learn from your time there that you still use today?**

¹ <http://www.challies.com/articles/ordinary-christian-work> (excerpt)

EXPLORE IT

READ 1 THESSALONIANS 4:9–12

2. What issue did Paul see no reason to write or teach the Thessalonians about?

3. What three things does Paul command the church to do in our text?

4. Who might be affected by the way a Christian lives their life?

GET IT

5. After a commendation regarding their character in verse 1, he commends them for their “love of the brethren” in verses 9–10 and then encourages them to “excel still more” in these areas. If Paul were writing our church, what are some things we already do well in which he might encourage us to “excel still more”?

*Paul begins by reminding them of their duty to practice brotherly love. “Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you.” That’s an interesting way to put it, isn’t it? “I don’t need to remind you about this, but I think I will anyway.” The word for “brotherly love” in Greek is a word that everyone here already knows. Literally in Greek the word is **philadelphia**. It’s a word that outside the New Testament almost always is used for the love of family members for one another.*

It comes from two Greek words that have been joined together:

Philos, which means “tender affection, fondness, devotion.” It’s a word that implies an obligation to love.

Adelphos, which literally means “one born of the same womb.”

*So the word **philadelphia** literally means “tender affection owed to those born from the same womb.” It’s easy to understand why the early Christians adopted this word to describe Christian love. All Christians have been “born of the same womb” through the new birth. **Everyone who is saved is saved the same way.**²*

6. Based on the above definition, what should brotherly love look like in practical ways today?

² Sermon by Ray Pritchard found @ <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/1996-10-20-Your-Reputation-Matters/>

7. What are some features of a church that excels at loving one another?

8. What can happen to a church when love is absent? What types of activities will become prevalent in a church that lacks love?

9. In what ways can the leaders of a church help to foster a church that excels in brotherly love?

The word here rendered "taught of God" (yeodidaktoi) occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. It is correctly translated, and must refer here to some direct teaching of God on their own hearts, for Paul speaks of their being so taught by him as to need no special precepts in the case. He probably refers to that influence exerted on them when they became Christians, by which they were led to love all who bear the Divine image. He calls this being "taught of God," not because it was of the nature of revelation or inspiration, but because it was, in fact, the teaching of God in this case, though it was secret and silent.

God has many ways of teaching men. The lessons which we learn from His Providence are a part of His instructions. The same is true of the decisions of our own consciences, and of the secret and silent influence of His Spirit on our hearts, disposing us to love what is lovely, and to do what ought to be done. In this manner all true Christians are taught to love those who bear the image of their Savior. They feel that they are brethren; and such is their strong attachment to them, from the very nature of religion, that they do not need any express command of God to teach them to love them.

It is one of the first--the elementary effects of religion on the soul, to lead us to love "the brethren;" and to do this is one of the evidences of piety about which there need be no danger of deceptions. ³

10. How have believers been God-taught to love one another? What evidence do you see of God's love being poured into your heart?

11. What are some expressions of "brotherly" or "sisterly" love you have seen or experienced at your church?

³ Barnes Notes on the New Testament found @ <http://classic.studylight.org/com/bnn/view.cgi?book=1th&chapter=4&verse=1>

12. Are there any other believers in your life that you struggle to love? How do you handle that?

Many Christians compartmentalize their faith. With their Christianity neatly tucked away in their back pocket, backpack, or purse, they head off to work, school, or their daily activities. While they may see their Christianity as a part of their lives, they fail to acknowledge it as the heart of their lives. Unfortunately, many Christians never see the direct link between their faith and their daily activities. Their thinking may go something like this: employment is for working, school is for learning, leisure is for playing, and church is for Sunday. By viewing life in this way they miss the whole point of their faith.

As Paul put it, Jesus is not a part of your life; Jesus is your life (Colossians 3:4). By acknowledging this truth, you will no longer see Jesus as a part of your workday—you will see Him as the One who sets the agenda for how you work. You will no longer see Him as a part of your school day—you will see Him as the One who sets the agenda for how you study. You will no longer see Him as a part of your daily schedule—you will see Him as the One who sets the agenda for how you schedule your days.

The Thessalonians loved those inside the church, but they also needed to love those outside the church. One of the simplest ways in which they could demonstrate their love and respect for others was by working diligently at their jobs. We would do well to remember that how we work at our jobs says much about how we view our faith (Colossians 3:23–24). That Paul saw the need to address the irresponsible behavior of some of the Thessalonians clearly indicates that their poor testimony was adversely affecting the ministry of the church and the integrity of the gospel (4:11–12).⁴

13. Paul gives us a threefold instruction in 4:11–12. What typical attitudes about work and life today are challenged by the statements above?

In anticipation of the Lord's return, believers are to lead peaceful lives, free of conflict and hostility toward others, which is a witness to the transforming power of the gospel.⁵

14. What does leading a “quiet life” mean? How does this apply to your life and work?

“Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life” (1 Thessalonians 4:11, NIV) seems like a paradox; if you are ambitious, your life will probably not be quiet. But the emphasis is on quietness of mind and heart, the inner peace that enables a man to be sufficient through faith in Christ. Paul did not want the saints running around creating problems as they earned their daily bread.⁶

⁴ Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Thessalonians (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) by Mark Howell

⁵ MacArthur, John: 1 & 2 Thessalonians. Moody Press or Logos

⁶ Wiersbe, W: Bible Exposition Commentary. 1989. Victor or Logos

15. Why does Paul tell his readers to live a quiet life? Why does Paul encourage his readers to work hard? Do these things make the gospel and the church a more welcoming place towards outsiders? Why or why not?

When believers display diligent work attitudes and habits and live in a loving and tranquil manner that respects others' privacy and does not intrude or gossip, it constitutes a powerful testimony to unbelievers and makes the gospel credible.... Believers who sacrificially love other people, exhibit tranquil lives, conscientiously focus on keeping their own lives in order, and faithfully carry out their daily responsibilities in the workplace (thus avoiding any welfare dependence)—all the while proclaiming the gospel in light of the return of Christ—are the most effective witnesses to their unsaved neighbors and loved ones.⁷

16. In what ways does working hard keep us honest?

17. Read 1 Thessalonians 5:1–2. Why did some of the Thessalonian believers quit their jobs? What effect did this have on their church and their witness?

18. Give some specific examples of how Christians can work with their hands in such a way that their work points to Christ.

19. How are Christians viewed in the public sphere? How much of any negative perception is deserved? How should Christians engage in the public sphere in a way that seeks justice for outsiders?

20. What are some practical ways that you can apply Paul's instruction in this passage to your work, school, or leisure activities?

⁷ MacArthur, John: 1 & 2 Thessalonians. Moody Press or Logos