

Dependent on Each Other and on No One

1 Thess. 4:9-12; 2 Thess. 3:6-15

Background: This week's text is shorter and more difficult than those of previous weeks. It is also more necessary to understand its background in the Greco-Roman world of Paul and his churches. First, it is probably helpful to remember that the early Christians met in homes, not church buildings. These homes would have been the homes of the wealthier members, homes large enough to allow for 20-50 people to meet together. This changes the dynamic of relationships (the church really does seem like a family). Second and more importantly, it is helpful to know that there was no governmental welfare system in the Roman Empire. The poor were expected to work in the fields or the mines or other day jobs that would generally put food on their table and a roof over their head. But where did they get these jobs, and what did they do during droughts and economic downturns and when they were ill or had any number of other problems? The answer involves the patron-client system. In a nutshell, the rich (the patrons) were expected to take care of a certain number from the poorer classes (the clients), giving them jobs, contacts, and even direct handouts when needed. What did the patrons get out of this arrangement? They felt not only that they were contributing to the welfare of others; they also had help available whenever they needed it, and, most importantly, they received great honor from the community for being such humanitarians. In fact, it was the duty of the client to let everyone know what a marvelous person their patron was.

Text: The first two verses are not difficult to grasp, but they are interesting for a couple of reasons. First, Paul uses the term *philadelphia* (brotherly love), which had always referred to the love of family members for each other. Of course, Paul is speaking of the church family. More fun is the fact that Paul tells them that he doesn't even need to mention what he is clearly mentioning and asking them to do even better: "We do not need to write to you ..." We understand this as simply a way of speaking (or writing), very much like we do when we say, "not to mention this or that." The reader gets the impression that the Thessalonians are doing well in their love for each other, especially being such new converts, but that they can do better. Paul wants to be encouraging and at the same time to call on them to do more. But what is the "more" that he wants? What aspect of brotherly love is he thinking about?

This question takes us to the difficult verses, 11-12. Paul's request for them to live quiet lives, mind their own business, and work with their hands has been interpreted in many ways. Perhaps most popular in the past is the view that these new Christians were expecting Jesus to return any day: they had quit their jobs and had abandoned their normal lives in favor of an excited but unproductive wait for Jesus to appear. In other words, since they thought Jesus was coming back very soon, they thought it was a time to give up normal pursuits and rejoice in the future.

This view is attractive in some ways—for example, they did seem to expect Jesus back soon, according to 2 Thess. 2:1-6. However, most serious students of this letter have abandoned this approach. The problem is that Paul does not link their failure to work and lead a quiet life with their expectation of Jesus' quick return. The more commonly accepted understanding of this week's text today is that some of the Thessalonian Christians were taking advantage of the brotherly love (*philadelphia*) of other Christians by not working, preferring to be supported by the wealthier and more generous Christian patrons. Some of these new Christians preferred to be busybodies rather than keeping their bodies busy working. It is easy to understand how this could happen in a house-church setting in a world accustomed to a patron-client system. Therefore, Paul's response is that they need to mind their own business and work. Not only would this show their love of each other—it would also command the respect of outsiders, who might otherwise see this new group as a bunch of lazy freeloaders.

The best commentary on this section is probably a section from Paul's next letter to these Christians, 2 Thess. 3:6-15. They must have still been experiencing the same problems, because Paul speaks more pointedly to the issue, "commanding" them to "keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive." He goes on in that passage to

remind them of his own example when he was with them: he worked with his hands (presumably making tents) “night and day, laboring and toiling” so as not to be a burden on them. He even goes so far as to say, “Anyone who is unwilling to work shall not eat.” Once again, in that section there is no link between their unwillingness to work and their near-expectation of the second coming of Jesus. There must have been some Thessalonians who thought they had found the perfect group: lots of love, forgiveness and salvation, and no need to work!

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think Paul means when he writes that these Christians have no need for him to write about brotherly love since they have been “taught by God to love each other”? How were they taught by God?
2. Paul mentions in 4:10 that these Christians love not only each other but all the Christians “throughout Macedonia”. Perhaps it would be helpful to look at a map in the back of your Bible to see how far it was between the cities of Thessalonica, Berea, Philippi, and perhaps others. How well do you think they knew each other, and how did they show their love for each other? What was the natural connection between these churches? (I am guessing that it was the synagogue connections that had existed for generations.) Does this have anything to say to us about our interaction with other churches?
3. How would a house-church setting (rather than the way we typically meet for worship and activities) add to or detract from authentic Christian experience? (Try to think of the positives and the negatives.)
4. How might the patron-client system have aided or hindered first-century Christian experience? Would it be a natural system for extending Christian charity? Would it give too much power and influence to the rich? Would it underscore the differences in social status? Would it create dependence? Would the Christian demand for love of each other (rather than seeking honor from the community) have made it a better or worse system? And do we have anything comparable today? Should we, or would it simply create problems?
5. Even more importantly, how do you think these teachings about work and quietness relate to the very different world that we live in? Is Paul suggesting that Christians not be involved in community or political matters? Is Paul teaching that Christians should make all their decisions based on how their lives will appear to outsiders? Or is this section primarily about not being dependent on others? And how should we think about the value of hard work in light of this passage and 2 Thess. 3:6-15?