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# Humble Living

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

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## Notes

**9** Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, **10** for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, **11** and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, **12** so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one. (4:9-12)

**9-10** Now Paul turns to a positive instruction about the need to strengthen and increase their brotherly love (Gk. *philadelphia*) for one another (*cf.* 3:12), as God had instructed and impelled them to do. Their love in fact already extended beyond their own church to Christians in other places, probably in giving hospitality and material help to others.

**11-12** Some people in the church were taking advantage of this brotherly love to live off charity without doing any work themselves (*cf.* 2 Thes. 3:6-15). These idlers may have been influenced by their belief that the second coming of Jesus was near; if so, they reasoned, why bother working? Paul instructs them to make it a matter of honour to avoid being busybodies, to look after their own affairs in a responsible way, and to be prepared to do an honest day's work. This would prevent them losing the respect of other people.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall, I. H. (1994). [1 Thessalonians](#). In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., p. 1282). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

**9. Now about brotherly love.** Having previously, in lofty terms, commended their love, he now spoke by way of anticipation, saying, **we do not need to write to you.** He gave a reason—**for you yourselves have been taught by God**—by which he means that since love was engraved on their hearts, there was no need for further instruction written on paper. He does not just mean what John writes about in his first letter: “As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in him” (1 John 2:27). Their hearts were saturated with love, showing that the Holy Spirit had inwardly dictated efficaciously what should be done, so that there was no need to given written instructions. In this argument Paul moved from the greater to the lesser. Since their love diffused itself throughout the whole of Macedonia, he inferred that there was no doubt that they did indeed **love each other.** The conjunction **for** means “likewise.” He added this for greater emphasis.

**10. Yet we urge you.** Although the apostle declared that the Thessalonians were sufficiently prepared for all ministries of love, he nevertheless did not cease to exhort them to make progress, for no one in this life has reached perfection. Unquestionably, even if we appear to be making excellent progress, we must still desire to become even better. Some link the verb **make it your ambition** (verse 11) with what follows, as if he exhorted them to strive to keep the peace; but it goes better with the previous sentence. After he admonished them to increase in love, he told them to each strive to be victorious in the matter of mutual affection. In order that their love may be perfect or complete, the apostle said there should be a great effort made among them, just as there is among those who are seeking to win a victory in battle.

**11. Lead a quiet life.** This means to act peacefully and without disturbance—as we say in French, *sans bruit* (without noise). In short, the apostle exhorted them to be peaceable and tranquil, **to mind your own business.** We commonly see that those who intrude into other people's affairs create a great disturbance and make trouble for others as well as for themselves. The best way to lead a tranquil life is for all to be absorbed with the duties of their own calling, carrying out the duties given them by the Lord and devoting themselves to these things. The farmer concentrates on his rural activities, the workman busily carries out his labors, and so on, and in this way everyone keeps within their own boundaries. But as soon as people turn away from this, everything is thrown into confusion and disorder. The apostle does not mean, however, that everyone should **mind [their] own business** in such a way that they all live separate lives and do not care for one another.

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**Work with your hands.** The apostle recommends manual labor for two reasons (verse 12). First, so they would have enough money to live on; and, second, so they would live in an honorable way in front of unbelievers. Nothing is more offensive than a person who is an idle good-for-nothing, who benefits neither himself nor anybody else, and who appears to have been born just to eat and drink. In addition, this truth has a further application, for what the apostle says about hands is a synecdoche; he clearly includes every useful employment of human life.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. BROTHERLY LOVE (4:9–12)

The second specific exhortation regarding Christian living accentuates the positive. Though sexual impurity is a danger to be avoided (vv. 3–8), loving other Christians is a practice to be cultivated. Both deal with the general subject of loving one's neighbor as himself, the basic horizontal aspect of Christian living.

4:9. Some instructions for Christians come through their brethren in Christ. But other lessons are **taught by God** to His children directly, things that almost intuitively seem right for a Christian to do. Loving other Christians is such a lesson. Christians quickly learn that there is a real kinship between believers, and they relate to other Christians in a way they do not relate to those outside God's family. The Thessalonians had already learned **to love each other** even though they were new Christians. Paul pointed out that God Himself had **taught** them this.

4:10. Paul did not need to write and tell them to love one another, but he did need to write and urge them to do this **more and more** (cf. v. 1). The evidence that they had learned the lesson of brotherly love was their deep, selfless, giving affection for Christians in others parts of their province of **Macedonia**. These were their neighbors in Philippi, Berea, and perhaps other towns where Christians lived. Paul commended believers for their love when he wrote the churches (cf. 2 Cor. 8:1–5). Yet there was still room for improvement, perhaps in the persistence and consistency of their love.

4:11. Everyday habits of living manifest love of the brethren as do more special demonstrations of affection. It is these habits that Paul suggested the Thessalonians ponder in the light of brotherly love. He suggested these goals as worthy objectives for their maturing love. His words may reflect less than ideal conditions in their church.

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<sup>2</sup> Calvin, J. (1999). [1, 2 Thessalonians](#) (pp. 46–47). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

First, his readers should lead a restful life. The word translated **quiet** (*hēsychazein*) means quiet in the sense of restfulness (cf. Acts 22:2; 2 Thes. 3:12; 1 Tim. 2:2, 11), rather than quiet as opposed to talkativeness (*sigāō*; cf. Acts 21:40; 1 Cor. 14:34). The former means "undisturbed, settled, not noisy," while the latter means "silent." Paul was telling the Thessalonians to be less frantic, not less exuberant. A person who is constantly on the move is frequently a bother to other people as well as somewhat distracted from his own walk with God. The latter can lead to the former. But a Christian who strives to be at peace with himself and God will be a source of peace to his brethren. Such quietude constitutes a practical demonstration of love for others.

Second, Paul recommended minding one's **own business**. The connection with love for the brethren is obvious (cf. Prov. 25:17).

Third, working with one's own hands demonstrates love for the brethren because a self-supporting person is not a burden to others. Paul himself set the example by working **with his hands** when he was in Thessalonica (1 Thes. 2:9). Too restful a life can be a problem also, and Paul guarded against that with this instruction. This verse dignifies manual labor. The reference also suggests that many, perhaps most, in the church came out of the working class. The Greeks deplored manual labor and relegated it to slaves as much as possible. But the Jews held it in esteem; every Jewish boy was taught a trade regardless of his family's wealth. Work itself is a blessing, and working with one's hands should never be despised by Christians. A man who is willing to work with his hands demonstrates his love for his brethren by being willing to humble himself to provide for his own needs so that he does not depend on others but provides for himself.

4:12. There are good reasons for these exhortations. Such behavior does **win the respect** of non-Christians and so glorifies the Christian's God. Love of this kind is appreciated by everyone. Paul placed importance on the testimony of Christians before **outsiders**, unbelievers. This kind of behavior also wins the respect of Christians; people appreciate those who do not take advantage of them. Paul discouraged the Thessalonians from expecting financial favors from the brethren simply because they were fellow Christians. Nor was he promoting a fierce spirit of independence; he was not saying that every Christian must become completely self-sufficient. He was advocating personal responsibility, as is clear from the context. This is a manifestation of mature Christian love for the brethren.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Constable, T. L. (1985). [1 Thessalonians](#). In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, pp. 702–703). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, while he was ministering on this earth, explained to us how the world will know that we are Christians: "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). He did not say that the world will know we are his disciples by our correct doctrine. He did not say that the world will know we are his disciples by the power of our words. He said that the world will know we are his disciples because of our love for one another.

Love is a powerful testimony to the reality of the Christian faith. In the third century Tertullian once reported that the Romans would say about the Christians, "See how they love one another." Justin Martyr explained Christian love this way:

We who used to value the acquisition of wealth and possessions more than anything else now bring what we have into a common fund and share it with anyone who needs it. We used to hate and destroy one another and refused to associate with people of another race or country. Now, because of Christ, we live together with such people and pray for our enemies.

Christianity spread rapidly through the Roman world because of this love. We do not have records of missionary programs or evangelistic programs from that era. But we have examples of this type of love, and the world noticed, just as Jesus said they would.

In spite of the emphasis on love in the Scriptures, the Christian church is not known for love today. We are known for our divisions, our fights, our disagreements, our anger, our specific doctrines, but not for our love. And we must repent of this. We must get back to basic Christianity, to first things. We must regain our love for Jesus Christ, our love for one another, and our love for our neighbor. Love is at the heart of the Christian mission and our witness to the world because in our love for one another we reflect the love of Christ.

### **WALKING TO PLEASE THE LORD**

In 1 Thessalonians 4:9–12, Paul is addressing this topic of love and the importance of it in the church, and he can help us regain a proper perspective regarding our love. Paul's words here concern practical Christianity. He is addressing what our lives should look like in light of the gospel: "Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more" (4:1). Paul is concerned



about how we ought to walk and please God. We should live in a way that reflects our love for God and our love for each other.

Paul is picking up on a common terminology in Scripture by explaining that we should walk in a way that pleases the Lord. Psalm 1 describes this way of life. In fact, Psalm 1 describes the two ways of life, the way of the righteous and the way of the unrighteous. The psalmist says, "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night." If we walk in the way of the Lord, if we live in a way that pleases the Lord, we will be "like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither." All that we do will prosper. The other path of life is the way of the wicked. The psalmist says, "The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish."

Psalm 1 sets out the direction of the two courses that we can take in life—the course of righteousness, which is a life that pleases God and walks in a manner that is worthy of God, or the course that is wicked, which is a life that does not concern itself with God or care about what God says. Paul picks up on this imagery in chapter 4 of 1 Thessalonians by explaining what should be different for us as we live in a way that honors and pleases the Lord. The first thing that he points out in 1 Thessalonians 4 is to "abstain from sexual immorality." We are called to be pure and to relate to other people, both men and women, in a way that pleases God and honors the other person. The second area of life that Paul now addresses is brotherly love (vv. 9–12).

### ***TWO DANGERS REGARDING BROTHERLY LOVE***

As we examine this concept of brotherly love, there are two dangers we have to guard against in the Christian church. One danger is that we do not show love to each other. In other words, we are not looking for opportunities to love our fellow brothers and sisters. This could be simple acts of love like writing letters or making phone calls, or it can be more sacrificial acts of love like buying a meal or helping with issues in the home. We must be reminded to love one another, and we need to be open and honest about some of our struggles so we can fulfill this command.

The other danger to avoid regarding love is to show too much of it in the wrong way. That might sound surprising, but I think it is exactly what Paul is pointing out to us here. We can go too far with this sense of brotherly love and allow people to be irresponsible. In the name of love we excuse the behavior of other people. If

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someone loses a job, it is one thing to help them and get them back on their feet. But if that person seems to be living off the benevolent love the church has shown, then we have to shift gears from love to discipline. John Stott explains it this way: "True, it is an expression of love to support others who are in need; but it is also an expression of love to support ourselves, so as not to need to be supported by others." We often do not consider that our own work is an expression of love to others because we do not need to be supported by them.

### **LOVE ONE ANOTHER: THREE COMMANDS**

Paul now gets very practical about what brotherly love should look like. Paul told us to love one another and to live well with one another. Now he tells us what that looks like. Paul gives us three admonitions, three commands that we are called to obey, and then gives us two reasons why these commands are important. First, Paul commands us to live a quiet life (v. 11). Many translators have noted that this is something of an oxymoron. Gordon Fee explains that it could literally be translated, "strive hard to live quietly." He also points out that the word "quiet" here does not carry the idea of "not speaking" or "being restful" but of not intruding into the lives of other people, especially brothers and sisters in the faith, and so becoming a burden to them. Paul is instructing us to live our lives in such a way as not to burden others, but he is also warning us not to draw attention to ourselves. We can see that in Acts 17. When Paul started this church, there was a great deal of attention drawn to these Christians because of a riot, and a well-known and possibly wealthy man named Jason was drawn out and taken into custody. Once he was released, the Christians had to sneak Paul and Silas out of the city by night.

Perhaps this ties into our passage. I imagine that Paul's detractors argued that he was being a coward by leaving in the middle of the night. Surely he should have been bold and should have gone into the middle of the city to preach Christ. Of course, Paul did this in other circumstances, but in Thessalonica he chose to leave quietly. This was a lesson for the Thessalonian believers, and they undoubtedly learned from that particular experience of the Apostle Paul. These Christians needed to be as cautious about how they lived as Paul was in his departure.

This also seems to be something that Paul addressed in other situations. A notable example is 1 Timothy 2:1-4. Paul urges us to pray "for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way" (vv. 1, 2). And the result in verse 4 seems to be that people will come to the faith. Peter describes the same situation for a marriage when he encourages wives to win their husbands "without a word" but by their conduct, which demonstrates "the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit"

(1 Peter 3:1–4). The point in both cases is that it is a Biblical notion for Christians to influence non-Christians by their quiet and humble life. In our culture sometimes Christians stir up problems for themselves because they do not know when to back away from an issue. We often say it's a sign of conviction to be bold in what we say, but such boldness can also be a sign of foolishness and can create bigger problems because we are not living a quiet and humble life before the Lord.

The second command Paul gives here is that we are to “mind your own affairs” (v. 11), or as the NIV puts it, “to mind your own business.” These first two commands seem to be connected. We might say they are two sides of the same coin. Paul seems to clarify this command to do our own work in 1 Thessalonians 5:14: “And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle.” Some people in the Thessalonian church had become idle, which means they were not working with their hands. Instead of doing their own work, they were meddling in the affairs of other people. This continued to be a problem, for Paul explains in his second letter, “For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat” (3:10). The problem is “idleness” (2 Thessalonians 3:11), or perhaps a better translation would be that they are walking “disorderly.” They are not “busy at work, but busybodies” (2 Thessalonians 3:11). What should such people do? Paul commands them “to do their work quietly and to earn their own living” (2 Thessalonians 3:12).

Now it seems that there are several problems taking place at one time in this situation. There is a problem with people not working. Since they do not work, they cannot earn a living, and this puts a strain on the life of the church. But their lack of work does not mean they are just sitting at home. Instead they are “busbodies.” They are worrying about areas that are not their concern. Paul is talking about the kind of person who does not do his or her work but just hangs around while you are trying to do your work. So their not working creates a strain on the church both financially and relationally. Again this produces a situation that is not in line with the love that should be expressed within the community.

Paul's third command is to “work with your [own] hands” (1 Thessalonians 4:11). There are important connections here. Paul urges them to live a quiet life, which means they should mind their own business as well as work with their own hands. These commands in verse 11 are connected to a bigger problem in this church. There was something going on in the life of the church that was producing this situation. To be honest, we are not exactly sure what the cause was. There are several options. Some have said there was a shortage of work in the city. But the problem seems to be, as John Stott says, that the “idle are unwilling, not unable, to work.” Others argue that the church had accepted the Greek disdain for working



with your hands, and what developed was a super-spiritual view of life that claimed Christians should be preaching and teaching and studying and evangelizing, not wasting their time working. Others point out that these Christians were confused over the second coming of Christ. Since they thought he would come back quickly, some quit their jobs, sold their homes, and waited for Jesus to return. But when he didn't come back, the church had to help these Christians get their lives back together.

One recently discovered possibility related to patron-client relationships within the church. This is based on the idea that there were wealthy people in this church, according to Acts 17:4. Some women were apparently wealthy, and Jason was probably well-to-do since he had the room to house Paul, Silas, and Timothy. When some in the church are wealthy, it is often tempting to take advantage of them. Since they have money, we reason, surely they would not mind helping us out with our struggles. This is a real temptation lurking within the heart of men and women, and Paul is addressing this from a Christian perspective. If we approach others in that manner, we are not loving them. We are not living a quiet life, nor are we minding our own business and working with our hands. We are trying to put ourselves in a situation in order to benefit from the wealth of someone else.

Perhaps there was a combination of these issues, but whatever specific situation caused this problem, Paul's solution was the same: "aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands" (v. 11). We want to avoid the temptation of never helping someone when they are in need, but we also want to avoid the problem of creating a needy situation. We all have different personalities and different perspectives on life. We are all different in various ways. So let me present brotherly love to you like this: if you are the kind of person who tends to be nosy and you want to know everything that is taking place in the church, this passage is telling you to mind your own business. On the other hand, if you are the kind of person who is very comfortable with your little world, if you do not want to bother others or others to bother you, then this passage is pushing you to move toward your brothers and sisters in a spirit of love. If you do not know what kind of person you are, ask a friend or ask your spouse. Or you could talk to a pastor or respected spiritual leader. However this manifests itself in our lives, this is precisely the way we are called to love one another.

### **WHAT IS THE RESULT?**

Paul does not give us bare commands—he also provides reasons why we are supposed to live this way, and in this case he gives us two. First, Paul tells us that we are supposed to live this way so that we might "walk properly before outsiders" (v.

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12a). This is an important reason for the way we are called to live. Paul worked with his own hands as a tentmaker, and some scholars now think that the way Paul did evangelism was through his work. Weima explains:

It is commonly assumed that Paul won converts by preaching in the marketplaces ("street corner" evangelism). Nevertheless, there is good evidence his missionary work took place in the workshop and the private home. We can picture the apostle in Thessalonica laboring in a local workshop, perhaps one owned by Jason (Acts 17:5). During the long hours at his workbench, cutting and sewing leather to make tents, Paul would have had opportunities to share the gospel with fellow workers, customers, and other citizens who were interested in this tentmaker-philosopher newly arrived in the city.

We are called to live and work in that same manner so that non-Christians can see how we live and how we work. That is the primary means of drawing people to Christ. They can see the reality of the gospel in the way we live and work. This provides a missional thrust to the entirety of our lives.

The second reason Paul gives is in the last phrase of verse 12: "so that you may ... be dependent on no one." Why does Paul give this command? I think there are two reasons. First, to be dependent upon someone else in the congregation is unloving. That has been Paul's point since verse 9, and he presses the conclusion upon us: it is a loving act to be self-sufficient in regard to our own work. But perhaps Paul has another reason in giving this command. As Christians we are called to be dependent upon the Lord to provide our daily bread, and if we get in a situation where we are dependent upon someone else, it could cause us to compromise some Christian convictions. This could compromise our walk before outsiders.

Here is Paul's point: if we live in a way that reflects brotherly love, it will be obvious to the people we come into contact with in our culture. We will not have to loudly proclaim our faith to outsiders, but they will see our lives. In the city of Thessalonica, everyone would have noticed the change of lives in these Christians. They didn't participate in religious ceremonies and sexual immorality in the pagan temples. They didn't cheat each other or strangers. They worked hard, they took care of each other, and they loved each other. If you want your faith to be evident to those around you, Paul says, live in this sacrificial way, a way that reflects the love of Jesus to other people.

### ***A LIFE OF GROWTH AND SACRIFICE***

As we conclude this section, let's remind ourselves of the big picture from Paul's point of view. Paul has been pressing a particular theme upon us since the beginning of chapter 4: "Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more." This theme is an emphasis on pleasing the Lord in our lives. Although Paul is addressing the specific areas of sexual immorality and brotherly love, those concerns fit within the broader framework of his two perspectives on the Christian life. The first is Christian growth. These Christians were walking in a way that pleased the Lord, and Paul urged them to "do so more and more." Paul called upon them not to be satisfied with their present state as Christians but to keep growing. The Christian life does not have a point at which we attain total maturity in this life. We do not stop growing as Christians. If we think we are doing what Paul describes in this passage, we must not stop. We must not grow weary in doing well but rather continue to follow the path that Jesus Christ has laid out for us.

The second area Paul highlights is the importance of a sacrificial life. This would be the Christian virtue of unselfishness. The Christian life is marked, to a great degree, by sacrificial living, and we need to hear that message over and over because we are inherently prone to be self-centered. This is demonstrated in Paul's opening words in 1 Thessalonians 4: "Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God ..." What's the goal here? Is the goal to please ourselves? No. Clearly we are called as Christians to please God. We should each consider these questions: Am I living a life that pleases God? Are my priorities in order? Or is my life consumed with myself and what I want? How am I using my gifts and abilities? Am I using them in the service of the Lord or in my own service? Am I living a God-centered life or a self-centered life?

Why is this so important? Why should we live this type of sacrificial life? Because we follow the One who sacrificed himself for us. We follow the One who gave up everything that he had in order to bring us to God. That's at the root of why we obey these things.

We should thank the Lord Jesus Christ that he did not decide to watch out for himself when he came to this world, but that he had the thought of our redemption, our forgiveness, our future on his mind when he went to the cross. May we imitate that kind of love to others.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Grant, J. H., Jr. (2011). [\*1 & 2 Thessalonians: The Hope of Salvation\*](#). (R. K. Hughes, Ed.) (pp. 99–106). Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

Having established the centrality of “holiness” from God’s will to God’s own Spirit, Paul now turns to “love of brothers and sisters” (see the NRSV note, “brothers”; for discussion of the possibility of the gender-specific “brothers” in this letter, and particularly this section, see discussion of 4:4, 6 above). The Greek word here is the one from which the city, Philadelphia, takes its name. As that city’s nickname, “city of brotherly love,” suggests, the word is used regarding love within families and for family members (see Plutarch, *On Brotherly Love*, 478A–492B). Its use here resonates both with what has been written, especially in Paul’s use of family language (see comments above, esp. 1:4; 2:7, 12, 17), and with what is shortly to come. (Though lost in English translation, “aspire,” 4:11 and this word are both compound words beginning with the same, immediately noticeable, term for “love”; see comments on 4:11, below).

“Taught by God” is a unique term, used only here in Paul’s letters and within the whole New Testament, and used rarely throughout later literature (probably in each of those few cases directly borrowing from this). Whatever else it might mean for Paul and his addressees, in the context of such direct family language it certainly affirms and builds on Paul’s use of family/parental language for God (see 1:1). More specifically, it calls his addressees back to 1:4–6 in suggestive ways. There, 1:4, God “has chosen you,” the Holy Spirit is on the scene in association with “power” and “full conviction” (1:5), and Paul and his team (“us”) are in the role of teacher, along with “the Lord” (1:6; presumably Jesus). Here, simply and profoundly, God is teacher (see comments on 1:4–6, above).

The rhetorical pattern of suggesting that there is no “need” for this particular teaching (4:9) because “you” are already acting accordingly (presumed in 4:10) is familiar from 4:1 and 2:1 (see comments above). That said, the sweep of these three verses is striking, as Paul moves the scope and focus from “one another” within the local community (4:9), through Christian communities “throughout” the region (4:10) and then “toward outsiders” broadly (4:12). The reintroduction in 4:10 of “urge” language (see esp. comments on 4:1 and 2:12) in concert with yet another direct use of family language (see alternative, far more accurate reading for “beloved”—“brothers”) puts particular focus on the directives that follow in verse 11. Further, the directives in verse 11 are organized under the main verb, “aspire,” which, as indicated above, is related to the organizing verb for this set of verses (4:9–12), “love of brothers and sisters,” through the first term, “love” (it means literally, “love of honor”). Now, Paul will take such aspiration for “love of honor” in a particular direction via the ethos of family love.

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Each of the three directives in verse 11 brings the addressees back to the context of the workshop. In 1:3 that language is used metaphorically; in 2:9, its use is largely or fully nonmetaphorical (see esp. comments on 1:3 and 2:9, above). Here, there is a deep and meaningful marriage of those metaphorical and nonmetaphorical precedents as Paul, following a nod to the founding of the community (see above, comments regarding “taught by God”), speaks directly to actions and a broader ethos regarding relating to another and to others *as God’s assembly* within the workshop setting. Recall that from the first verse of the letter onward, Paul has been affirming and (re)constructing this community as an alternative “assembly of the Thessalonians” with an alternative “Lord” and alternative understanding of “peace” (see esp. comments on 1:1 and 2:12). Here, building to significant degree on the reports of the founding of community in both 1:4–6 and 2:9, Paul puts the focus directly on how to relate to one another and to the broader mission of the community.

The notion that one is “to aspire,” in other words, to love and pursue honor for oneself and family, was as much a part of the Gentile world within which and for which Paul was writing as was the air that was breathed. School children are still taught today about the Roman *cursus honorum*, literally the “course of honor,” by which one progressed through public and political life to fame and fortune. That “course of honor” is the ultimate example, in the Roman imperial context, of the very aspiring that this very word suggests. On another societal level, the word was used among trade associations and within workshop settings regarding such rivalry and competition as would attend the pursuit of power and honor. The verbs that follow directly upon “aspire” could not be less expected. Aspire “to live eagerly, in the broader public eye, competing with ‘brothers’ in your own workshop or from your same trade to gain a higher position”—such would have been the expected directives following “aspire.” Paul presents virtual opposites or, at the very least, alternatives, akin to the alternative understanding of “assembly,” “Lord,” “peace,” and “kingdom/empire” already presented (in 1:1 and 2:12).

In terms of what we might call church polity, Paul is presenting what some today would call a “flattened structure”—it is decidedly not top-down (“be dependent of no one,” 4:12), depends on all being engaged (“work with your hands,” 4:11), and shuns currying favor with constituents or power-brokers (“live quietly,” “mind your own affairs,” 4:11). The measure of an alternative assembly which has been “taught by God” is “to please God” not others. So, again, the call for dependence from any patrons or systems that bring their own agenda (4:12). As noted above, that “outsiders” are evoked at the end of these verses gives them quite a sweep (from internal to external concern). The “proper behavior” (literally, “good form”) called for



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is suggested by all that has preceded and by the final phrase of the section that follows.

To say the very least, within the alternative “assembly of God” there is no need for “honor” such as is given or expected in the broader “outside” society; that said, there is need for all to be engaged. Those characteristics fit well the second term that Paul uses for “love,” following “taught by God,” in 4:9. Many readers of this volume will have read about or heard sermons or bible study descriptions of “agape love”; that is the term Paul uses here. A terse and helpful definition of such “agape” is found in 2 Corinthians 8:8, in which Paul confesses to his addressees that “I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others.” Notice that the definition is, in grammatical terms, a negative one; it tells the reader what agape love is not. Immediately relevant to this discussion is that that “earnestness” against which this God-taught love of the Christian assembly stands is precisely the societally-expected standard. Indeed, 2 Corinthians 8:8, written years later than this, stands as a kind of summation of 1 Thessalonians 4:9–12.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Weidmann, F. W. (2013). *Philippians, First and Second Thessalonians, and Philemon*. (P. D. Miller & D. L. Bartlett, Eds.) (pp. 142–144). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.