

Good morning, Moon Valley!

We are continuing our sermons series titled, □ “Living Like He’s Coming.” It is based on a study through the New Testament letter of 1 Thessalonians.

The text we’re studying today is □ 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12. From this text, we are going to learn how to live as Christ followers in a culture war. We are going to discover godly ways to navigate a world torn by division and discord.

You see, ancient Thessalonica and modern America have some things in common. In both cultures, there was and is a growing pushback against the influence of Christianity. You may recall from previous studies that pushback in Thessalonica was so hard that the lives of Paul and his ministry partners were threatened, and they were run out of town.

Now, in this letter we call 1 Thessalonians, Paul is writing to the new believers he left behind in Thessalonica, explaining how to navigate the culture war they faced.

The big idea of our text is this: □ Our Christian role is neither to imitate nor to agitate our world, but to captivate it.

I realize that this idea is rather general and raises some questions. So, let’s work through the text to see how I got it and what it entails. In the first two verses of our text, □ 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10, Paul says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 4:9 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. . . .

The phrase, □ “brotherly love” is a translation of a single Greek term, φιλαδελφία. It’s the word after which the city, Philadelphia was named. The accent is just on a different syllable.

The Greek word, φιλαδελφία was a term used in ancient extra-biblical writings to refer to the love among literal brothers and sisters in an immediate family.¹ Christians in the early church borrowed the term and applied it to the love that should prevail among believers and followers of Jesus Christ.

The idea is that when people become believers, they become a part of a Christian family known as the church. And all who are in the church become brothers and sisters in Christ. Therefore, φιλαδελφία, or brotherly love, defines for us the object of our love: It is other believers.

That is not to say that we are not to love unbelievers outside the church. We are. But that is not Paul’s focus in our text. He is talking about the love of the brethren.

Here in verse 9, Paul also refers to another kind of love which is related to φιλαδελφία. When he says, □ “to love one another,” Paul is using the Greek verb, ἀγαπάω.

Whereas φιλαδελφία helps us define the *object* of our love—that is, fellow believers—ἀγαπάω helps us define the *content* of our love.

Bible scholar, Leon Morris has put together a 298-page study of love in the Bible, and he describes ἀγαπάω as having two essential components.²

¹ Leon Morris, *Testaments of Love*, 266.

² *Ibid.*, 128.

First, he says, “It is a love given quite irrespective of merit . . .” That is to say, it is unreserved. It is unconditional. It is given even when its recipients don’t deserve it. Its expression doesn’t depend on how good a person is.

Second, Morris says, “. . .it is a love that seeks to give.” It gives; it doesn’t take. It serves; it doesn’t demand. It is selfless, not selfish.

So, if you put together the concepts behind φιλαδελφία and ἀγάπῳ, you get serving fellow believers unreservedly and unselfishly. It is a Christ-like love. Paul highlights this kind of love as crucial to navigating the culture war the Thessalonians are facing.

And it is not a love that we can muster on our own. God must empower this kind of love. Here in verse 9, Paul says to the Thessalonians regarding loving one another, □ “you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God.” Actually, a better translation might be “you are *being* taught by God,” because the verb is in the present tense, which usually describes a current, ongoing action. Their learning wasn’t over, they were in process.

Just exactly how was God teaching them, and how does he teach us today about loving fellow believers? And how do we learn what he is teaching?

Well, I can think of at least three ways God teaches us to love. And every one of them requires that we diligently learn and apply what the Bible says.

First, God has given us himself in the person of Jesus Christ as a perfect example of love. But we can only learn about Jesus through the lens of the Bible because that is where he is described.

Second, God has given us the Bible which provides descriptions and directives regarding love, which include giving, serving, uniting, fellowshiping, consoling, modeling, committing, respecting, motivating, sympathizing, greeting, sharing, teaching, assembling, confessing, comforting, welcoming, forgiving, communicating, exhorting, admonishing, submitting, caring, refreshing, encouraging, edifying, empathizing, restoring, working, confronting, and telling the truth.

That's a lot of "ings." But we can only learn about them and apply them by studying the Bible.

And third, God has given us his Holy Spirit who helps us to apply these truths to our lives. But the Holy Spirit is not a spiritual substitute for the Bible. He's the person who helps us apply the Bible. He's the guy who empowers us to live in response to God's word. Apart from the Spirit, we cannot love as Christ loved. That's why I say we cannot muster this kind of love on our own. It must be spirit led.

Paul is commending the Thessalonians because they are being taught by God to love one another, and their love of the brethren had extended beyond the church in Thessalonica to bless all the believers in the surrounding region of Macedonia. In the first part of verse 10, Paul says, □ "for that is indeed what you are doing to all the brothers in Macedonia."

As commendable as their love is, Paul encourages still more growth. In the last part of □ verse 10, he says,

ESV 1 Thessalonians 4:10 . . . But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more,

Paul wants his spiritual children to abound more and more in loving one another.

And in historical context, the reasons are compelling. In ancient Thessalonica, for a Jew to come to faith in Jesus would typically bring harsh ostracism from unbelieving Jews. Jewish believers would often be disowned and boycotted.

Similarly, Gentiles coming to faith in Jesus would draw the ire of unbelieving Gentiles. Unbelieving Gentiles in ancient Greece were generally polytheists who had no problem with the idea of adding another god one's religious pantheon. But to suggest that there is only one true God was viewed as offensive, narrow-minded, and threatening.

It is not hard to see, then, how important it would be for believers in the Thessalonian church to love one another as a means of encouragement and even survival in the face of such ostracism.

Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, such love is the primary way we Christians are to captivate our culture. It's not my idea. It comes from Jesus. In John 13:34, Jesus urges his followers to love one another just as he has loved them, saying,

ESV John 13:34 "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another."

Then, in the very next verse, Jesus gives a reason for loving this way.

ESV John 13:35 "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

The kind of love to which Jesus calls his first followers is the very same kind of love to which Paul calls the Thessalonians. It is the love we are to be known for. It is the love that is to set us apart. It is the love that draws people to Christ.

It is more than just an imitation of the fashionable “be-nice” behavior of our culture. Anyone can choose to be nice for a while.

But only a Spirit-led believer can love the way Jesus loved—to love sacrificially, to love unconditionally, to love our enemies, to love the seemingly unlovable, unreservedly and unselfishly, again and again.

Such Christ-like love captivates like nothing else.

In □ John 12:32, Jesus says,

ESV John 12:32 “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

Jesus is referring to his being lifted up from the earth on a cross to die in the place of and on behalf of his enemies, including you and me. This is the ultimate act of sacrificial love. Jesus says such love □ “will draw all people.” That is another way of saying his love will captivate people.

Of course, not everyone will allow themselves to be captivated. There is a choice. Nevertheless, Paul encourages a love that draws people, whether or not they are willing to be drawn.

Not only does Paul urge the Thessalonians to abound in love, he also urges them to aspire to do three other things that go along with it. He lists the three things in □ verse 11:

ESV 1 Thessalonians 4:11 and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you,

Paul does not elaborate because he had already instructed the Thessalonians concerning these three things. So, this list is just a reminder for them.

But we are left to figure out what these instructions mean and why they were given.

In □ verse 12, we get some clues as to why they were given. Paul gives two reasons.

ESV 1 Thessalonians 4:12 so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.

First, it seems that Paul is concerned for the reputation of the church in the eyes of unbelievers. To □ “walk properly before outsiders” is to live decently or becomingly or attractively in the eyes of those who are not part of the church.³

Second, when Paul says □ “be dependent on no one,” he seems concerned about believers being unreasonably dependent on others to supply their material needs. Paul doesn’t want believers to be on the dole without good reason.

In Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians, we gain further insight into the problem addressed in our text. In □ 2 Thessalonians 3:11-12, Paul says,

³ BDAG.

ESV 2 Thessalonians 3:11 For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. 12 Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

Evidently, some Thessalonian believers were lazy Christian freeloaders who used their free time to meddle in other people's business and stir up trouble. Paul urges them to "do their own work quietly and to earn their own living."

We don't know for sure why these believers weren't working. Some scholars speculate that some of the Thessalonians believed that Christ's return was so close that they quit their jobs, thinking that they didn't have to work anymore.

Other scholars surmise that some believers were part of a social structure called patronage. The institution of patronage was widespread in ancient Greco-Roman society. Basically, it involved clients attaching themselves to patrons of greater social status and economic means, hoping to receive protection and provision from the patron in exchange for allegiance and public support. Wealthy patrons essentially bought popularity and political power by having a bevy of paid clients who would fawn over them.⁴

Whatever the case, Paul wanted Christians who were able to work to be gainfully employed so as not to be financially dependent on others. To the extent that some believers were imitating their culture in getting caught up in widespread patronage, they needed to stop such freeloaders and get to work.

⁴ Green, Gene L., *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans Pub.; Apollos, 2002), 208-209.

Back in our text, we could cast verses 11 and 12 in the form of □ a diagram.

On the left, we have the three things to which the Thessalonians were to aspire: live quietly, mind your own affairs, and work with your hands.

On the right, we have the two reasons for aspiring to do these things: so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.

Let's start with the connection that is easiest to understand: □ Work with your hands so that you may be dependent on no one.

To work with your hands is not a call to be a blue-collar worker instead of white-collar one. Paul is simply exhorting all able-bodied Christians to earn their own living—to pull their own weight. This is a counterbalance to the encouragement to love one another discussed earlier.

The Thessalonian church had thus far been quite good at loving each another, and no doubt that included helping one another with material things, as needed. But Paul does not want some lazy, entitled believers to take advantage of such love. To do so might jeopardize the church's ability to care for those who truly need it.

There may also be a □ connection between working with your hands and walking properly before outsiders. If some believers were indeed imitating culture by being involved in relationships with patrons who supplied their needs in exchange for political favors, then this could undermine their testimony. Outsiders might wonder: Is what you're saying about Christ really true, or is this just about politics? Did your patron pay you to say this stuff?

Moreover, it would hardly be captivating to give the impression to outsiders that the church is where able-bodied deadbeats go to leach off the generosity of others.

Now, let's consider □ the connection between living quietly, minding your own affairs, and walking properly before outsiders.

Bible scholar □ Dr. Gene L. Green explains what living quietly and minding your own affairs means in our text.

As an aside, for those of you in my age cohort, I'd like to clarify that Dr. Gene Green is not to be confused with □ Mr. Green Jeans, the guy on Captain Kangaroo. If you are too young to know who that is, just google it.

□ Dr. Green holds a Ph.D. in New Testament Exegesis, he is the Dean of Trinity International University and Professor Emeritus of New Testament at Wheaton College, and he is the author of several commentaries, including one on 1 Thessalonians.

I list Green's credentials to show you that he is a theologically conservative, evangelical scholar who holds a high view of Scripture as we do at Moon Valley. This is relevant because what he is about to say is likely to make some of you squirm.

Green says,

□ "The theme of 'being quiet' appears in the literature of the era in the description of those respectable people who do not cause problems in the community. . . . □ At times the thought of leading the quiet life is found in combination with the words of the following clause in our text, to mind your own business. □ This combination had to do with retiring from public activity, whether from the

tribunal or from politics in general. □ In fact, to mind your own business was the exact opposite of ‘participating in public affairs.’ □ We can safely assume that the apostle is calling believers to stay out of public/political affairs.”⁵

I realize that, for some professing Christians, them’s fightin’ words. Stay out of political affairs?!

But Green’s interpretation is not an isolated one. It is shared by quite a few scholars represented in my library.⁶

Keep in mind that Green is thus far interpreting only what Paul meant by what he said to the Thessalonians. He has not yet addressed the transferability of this idea to modern culture.

In ancient Thessalonica, to stay out of public or political affairs was wise counsel for the new believers in the church there at that time. Remember, Paul’s life had recently been threatened and he was run out of town. Now was not the time for the new believers back in Thessalonica to stage a public Paul’s-life-matters protest. In the original Greek that would be *stupididzo*.

Nevertheless, I don’t think our text constitutes a categorical call for all Christians today to renounce all forms of political involvement. In fact, Green himself makes this point saying, □ “It would be unwise for us to understand the prohibition as a call to us to abandon any form of

⁵ Green, G. L. (2002). *The letters to the Thessalonians* (p. 210). W.B. Eerdmans Pub.; Apollos, 210;

⁶ Hock, Ronald F., *The Social Context of Paul’s Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1980), 46-47; Winter, Bruce W., *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens*, ed. by Andrew D. Clarke, *First Century Christians in the Graeco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; The Paternoster Press, 1994), 48-50; Martin, D. Michael, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), xxxiii, 136-137; Wanamaker, Charles A., *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990), 162-163.

involvement in politics. □ What the apostle warns against is becoming dependent as well as disruptive members of society whose reputation in no way enhances the gospel.”⁷

This is a good point. And it offers a good question to ask ourselves when tempted to respond in a certain way to some political provocation. The question is: Would this enhance the gospel? Would this make the good news of Jesus Christ attractive? Would this be captivating for Christ?

This fits well with Paul’s teaching in □ Titus 2:10, where he exhorts Titus to instruct the believers in his church to live in a Christlike way before outsiders for this purpose:

NIV Titus 2:10 . . . so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive.

The idea is to avoid anything that might needlessly agitate outsiders and compromise the attractiveness of our witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. When possible, it is wise to minimize the opportunity for outsiders to blow us off, saying something like, “You’re not really about Jesus; you’re just trying to gain political power to control people.” In controversial matters that are not central to the cause of Christ, sometimes it is best to keep a low profile.

This does not preclude any involvement in controversies and politics, but it does call us to be circumspect and selective, avoiding anything that might hinder our ability to bring the life of Jesus to our world.

That is not to say that we should imitate our culture by believing or accepting that which is untrue. It simply acknowledges that people are

⁷ Green, 213.

usually captivated by Christlike love, not air-tight logic. So, it is generally better to lead with love, not arguments.

So, having worked our way through the text, hopefully you have a better sense of what lies behind the big idea of my sermon: □ Our Christian role is neither to imitate nor to agitate our world, but to captivate it.

This is easy to say but messy to apply. It raises niggling questions and requires nuanced thinking.

Nevertheless, it is profoundly helpful for me to keep reminding myself that I am not here to imitate my world. Nor I am I here to agitate my world. I am here to captivate my world for the cause of Christ.

Sometimes as I seek to captivate for Christ, I will not be able to avoid agitating the world. In some ways, both Jesus and Paul agitated their world. But that was not their goal. The agitation was an unavoidable byproduct of living and proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ in an effort to captivate the world. But to *needlessly* agitate is counterproductive. The priority is to captivate.

Sometimes as I seek to captivate for Christ, I will end up imitating my world in some way. In a sense, Jesus imitated his world by humbling himself to become one of us.⁸ Paul imitated his world by becoming all things to all people that he might win some.⁹ But such imitation is a means to an end: not to compromise the truth, but to connect and captivate for Christ. Again, the priority is to captivate.

⁸ Philippians 2:7.

⁹ 1 Corinthians 9:22.

Our Christian role is neither to imitate nor to agitate our world, but to captivate it.

Here are □ two posters you can buy online today to put out in front of your house to tell everybody where you stand on some important issues.

On the left, we have a poster that says, “In this house, we believe black lives matter, women’s rights are human rights, no human is illegal, science is real, love is love, and kindness is everything.” If I’m not mistaken, I believe this poster came out first.

On the right, we have a poster responding to the poster on the left. One website calls it the “pushback” poster. It says, “In his house, we believe that biology is real, all lives matter, crime is illegal, Jesus is life, God is love, unborn babies are human beings, and truth is everything.”

Chances are good you resonate more with one side than the other. In fact, these posters may elicit a visceral us-versus-them feeling.

My purpose in showing these is not to take sides, but to ask a question.

Do these posters captivate outsiders? By outsiders I mean those who are not inclined to agree in the first place.

Let’s say you are a right-leaning person who sees the poster on the left in your neighbor’s yard while driving by. How likely are you to be so captivated by the poster that you pull over and think to yourself, “You know, these are some good points. Based on this poster, these neighbors seem like they would be gracious and approachable. Maybe I need to rethink my position. Maybe a conversation with my neighbor could help me do that.”

Or, let's say you are a left-leaning person who sees the poster on the right in your neighbor's yard while driving by. It mentions Jesus, which is not unusual for a right-leaning poster in our culture. How likely are you to be so captivated by the poster that you pull over and think to yourself, "You know, these are some good points. Based on this poster, these neighbors seem like they would be gracious and approachable. Maybe I need to rethink my position. Maybe a conversation with my neighbor could help me do that. Maybe I do need Jesus after all."

One could argue that these posters actually imitate our contentious, pushback, us-versus-them culture. Or one could argue that they do little more than pander to insiders and agitate outsiders. But it is hard to see how they could possibly captivate outsiders.

In evaluating anything we may be tempted to do or say as representatives of Jesus Christ, we would do well to ask ourselves: Would this enhance the gospel? Would this make the good news of Jesus Christ attractive? Would this be captivating for Christ? Would this be walking becomingly before outsiders?

This is important because, the big idea from our text is this: ☐ Our Christian role is neither to imitate nor to agitate our world, but to captivate it.

In our Fifteen class on faith, gender, and sexuality we have been learning not only about the dictates of Scripture, but also about the stories of individuals.

One young woman who grew up in the church and loved Jesus confessed to her pastor that she was attracted to other women. She was conflicted by it, didn't know what to do about it, and was hoping for some help to deal with it. She was asked to leave the church.

Disillusioned by this experience, the young woman gave up on church for nearly 20 years. During that time, she decided to imitate culture, identifying as a lesbian and getting married to another woman. After six years of marriage, her partner became terminally ill and died.

Grief-stricken and afraid, she randomly called a nearby church to see if they might be willing to do the funeral service. It happened to be a theologically conservative church that believed, as we do, that sexual expression is reserved for marriage between one man and one woman.

She asked the pastor, “My wife just died. We are lesbians. I was wondering if you would be willing to do the service.”

The pastor said, “It would be my honor. I am so sorry for your loss.”

The love shown by that church captivated her. Ultimately, she was drawn back to the church, back to a community that loves her, back to honoring God through purity, back to a personal ministry of helping fellow believers who struggle with same-sex attraction and gender dysphoria.

Our Christian role is neither to imitate nor to agitate our world, but to captivate it.

Let’s pray. Lord, help us to love as you love. By your Spirit, help us to discern how to walk properly before outsiders, living quietly, minding our own affairs, and working diligently, that we may captivate outsiders for Christ. Amen.

Next Sunday is Easter. Don’t forget to invite someone to come.

Also, please join us today in the lobby right after the service for our Spring Celebration, which includes lunch and festivities. The cost is \$5,

payable at the Connect Counter. If you don't have the \$5, or if you're new to Moon Valley, please enjoy the lunch on us. Just grab a plate and dig in. Lord, thank you for the food. Amen. Thanks for coming.