

# 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

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*Paul urges the believers to increase in their love, to be sanctified by focusing on their own business and working hard at their own jobs, rather than becoming burdens to others.*

Paul is describing what sanctification (being set apart, or holy) looks like. God's primary will for us is to be sanctified, set apart for the very special purpose He appointed us to, to serve others and live as servant leaders (1 Thessalonians 4:3). The first aspect of God's will for us in being sanctified is to be sexually pure. We are called to be servants to each other, rather than to exploit one another.

Sexual immorality is founded upon exploitation. Paul drew a contrast between what believers in God should do with the common pagan practices of the Greeks. Believers ought to control their bodies with honor, whereas the Greeks followed their lustful passions. Believers ought to live a life set apart (sanctified), rather than one of impurity. If we reject the command to be sexually pure, we are rejecting following God and His Spirit which lives within us and guides us. We are instead following the world. That means that instead of getting the great rewards promised by God, we will gain the empty and corrupt rewards of the world. The world promises joy, and delivers misery.

This is a fundamental principle to get straight, and it was especially radical for the Greek and Roman Thessalonians to reconfigure their minds concerning, since the culture at the time encouraged sexual promiscuity and in some places temple prostitution. That temple prostitution was part of pagan worship shows that paganism considered what God calls sexual immorality as a form of holy worship. It is hard to imagine two positions that are most opposed. Greek paganism justified sexual exploitation as an act of worship, while Christianity stated it was the foremost of things to avoid in order to be holy.

Paul immediately follows this lesson on sexual purity by reinforcing the importance of love among the Thessalonians: *Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia.*

He has praised them several times for the loving manner in which they treat one another, and has urged them to increase in their love for one another and all people (1 Thessalonians 1:3, 3:6, 3:12). It is love that counteracts an exploitative culture, where our focus is on serving one another's interests, rather than satisfying our own appetites (at their expense). Paul repeats the need for love here to drive home the point that this will keep them from falling back into their former way of life, but he does it by way of encouraging them, pointing out that it is *God* who has *taught* the Thessalonians to *love one another*.

*God taught* to His people *love of the brethren* in the Old Testament. Leviticus 19:18 gives the law for each Israelite to love others as they love themselves. The Thessalonians had *no need for*

*anyone to write* this to them, because they knew it, and it was already written in the scripture. Jesus quoted this commandment from Leviticus 19 to love our neighbor as ourselves, saying that this was the second greatest commandment (Matthew 22:39). Jesus then went further to give a new commandment, to command an even greater love than that of Leviticus 19. Jesus commanded His followers to *love one another as He has loved*. Jesus loved us by laying down His life (John 13:34). The Thessalonians had both understood this, as well as practiced this kind of love *toward all the brethren who are in Macedonia*.

Apparently they have interacted with other believers *who are in all Macedonia* (Northern Greece, where Thessalonica was located). Their *practice* of this *love of the brethren* (believers) was something that was evident. Their example honored God for all to see. This echoes what Jesus told His disciples, that the world would see they were His followers by the love they showed to each other (John 13:35). Even so, Paul emphasizes that *But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more* in love. This is the second exhortation to increase their love for each other. Loving others above loving ourselves is an ongoing practice. Loving our fellow brethren like Jesus loved us is something that should continue to increase. This kind of love is supernatural, and requires walking in the Spirit each day.

It is dangerous to think that once we've begun living out our sanctification, walking in obedience to Christ, that we'll continue it automatically. We must keep our eyes on God, who teaches us to love, and Christ, who showed us the perfect example of how to serve each other. The way things generally go in life, it is likely that if we don't continue to increase in love, then we will begin to decrease in love.

Paul then unpacks the second and third ways to be sanctified: to be industrious and to judge only ourselves, not others.

He tells the Thessalonians *to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands*. To work, earning a living, is part of our sanctification, when we work as unto the Lord, as though He is our boss (because He is). We are not serving others by being an economic burden when we have sufficient earning capacity ourselves. In his next letter, Paul is more explicit on this topic. He says:

“For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies.”  
(2 Thessalonians 3:10-11)

It appears that there were some Thessalonian believers who were mooching off others, perhaps taking advantage of their generosity. The Thessalonians were in great expectation that Jesus could return any day. Perhaps so much so that they did not consider work to be of importance. However, they got their notion of the immanent return of Christ from Paul, and Paul reminded them that he himself gave them the example of working with his own hands, that he would “not be a burden to any of you” (2 Thessalonians 3:8b).

Idle people tend to create trouble. We are to be industrious, and not unnecessarily stir up strife, but to *lead a quiet life*. Paul stirred up a lot of trouble due to him preaching the gospel, and living what is true. That trouble was due to others opposing his living, and teaching a life that was sanctified. Paul certainly does not have in mind here to avoid that sort of trouble. He had taught the Thessalonians to expect persecution (1 Thessalonians 2:13-14). The clear teaching of the Bible is to only use conflict and confrontation as is appropriate (Romans 12:18). And it is never appropriate to create a ruckus as a means of manipulation and exploitation. Paul created controversy because he spoke the truth, following the example of Jesus. He did not create division in order to gain leverage over others.

To be industrious is a great witness to nonbelievers, who Paul calls here *outsiders*. Paul directs the Thessalonians to *work with your hands, just as we commanded you, so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need*. To *not be in any need* is a witness to *outsiders*, likely because the brethren would be net contributors to the community, rather than those who extract. To work, to serve others with meaningful labor, is to *behave properly toward outsiders*. Doing a good job in our work, serving others with our labor, is an expression of our sanctification, our being set apart for special service to God.

Being sanctified means being industrious. It does not mean trying to find other people to serve us. It means looking for opportunities to serve others. That includes fellow believers as well as *outsiders*.

If we are “religious” and are exploiting, then we will be judgmental as a means of deflecting our own responsibility. That makes us a poor witness. Paul stated of people who spoke and acted religiously but lived as hypocrites:

“For ‘THE NAME OF GOD IS BLASPHEMED AMONG THE GENTILES BECAUSE OF YOU,’ just as it is written.  
(Romans 2:24)

Paul does not want us to be judgmental. He does not want us to say one thing then do another. He also does not want us to live for the approval of men. He wants us to let God to do the judging, and for us to focus on living a holy life. Just as Israel is called to be a priestly nation, so are we as believers called to be a good witness to those outside of the faith.

Paul puts an exclamation point on this in 2 Thessalonians. He tells those who are taking advantage of other believers to take care of themselves:

“Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.”  
(2 Thessalonians 3:12)

This is an excellent principle. When we enable people to be indolent, we are accomplices to a self-destructive lifestyle. Not just in church work, but in day-to-day work. Life is integrated. The gospel is 24/7. Some of the Thessalonians were apparently taking away the wrong lesson from looking forward to Christ’s return. They were using the hope of Jesus’s second coming as an

excuse to not work for themselves and become a burden on the rest of the community of believers.

Pauls calls expecting others to provide your sustenance “undisciplined” (2 Thessalonians 3:7). It creates chaos. It provides time for people to get into mischief. They aren’t caring for their own business, so they get into everyone else’s business. The simple exhortation here, from Paul, is for the Thessalonians to get to work, and get a job. To lead a *quiet life*, to *attend to your own business and work with your hands*. To live a *quiet life*, and work with industry helps us to *behave properly toward outsiders*.

Earn your own way. Serve rather than being served. Be a net contributor, rather than a burden. This also reminds of these admonitions Paul made to the Galatians:

- “Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2).
- “For each one will bear his own load” (Galatians 6:5).

We are to serve others, taking responsibility to help them, while carrying our own responsibilities, rather than expecting others to bear them. The opposite of this approach would be to exploit the generosity of others, demanding that they love us. This is using God’s commands the same way children use the principle of sharing. Rather than share with others, they tend to demand others share with them. This is not the way of Christ. Christ set aside His privilege and comfort to serve us (Philippians 2:5-10).

### **Biblical Text**

**9 Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; 10 for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more, 11 and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, 12 so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need.**