

EXCEL STILL MORE
1 THESSALONIANS 4:9-12

I have been asked many times (most often by visitors), “What is your vision for the church?” I haven’t always known how to answer that question. Sometimes that question implies other things like, “How big do you see the church being in five years? Ten years?” “What programs are you planning to develop?” “What buildings are you going to build in the next five years?”

While there are answers to some of those questions, most of those things are beyond our control: we can’t force people to visit, attend, join, or stay (so the numbers are beyond our control). We can plan for ministry (and we do), but the needs of the body and the community can change rapidly (remember March 2020 and COVID?) and ministry is also dependent on the gifting and availability of the members of the body. And while we can plan for buildings (and we have), the ability to build is dependent on giving (which also can’t be controlled) by people (that we can’t compel to join). So, many of the questions related to “what is your vision of the church?” are really unanswerable.

But there are components of that question that *are* answerable. Someone asked me recently, “What is mission critical for Grace Bible Church to flourish?” I found that question easy to answer: “Love and care of people — which means biblical instruction and biblical fellowship.” We preach the gospel and then teach and train and equip for ministry and then send people out to care for one another.

Our church moto is, “Shepherding God’s People by God’s Grace for God’s glory.” We care for one another by preaching the gospel and equipping with Scriptures and by the power of God’s Spirit, so that God is seen in what we do. We care well for one another. That’s our vision for GBC.

That has always been the vision for the church of Jesus Christ. In the second century, Tertullian (a theologian based in North Africa, ca. 160-220) envisioned unbelievers saying this of the church: “Look...how they love one another (for they themselves [pagans] hate one another); and how they are ready to die for each other (for they themselves are readier to kill each other).”

And that *was* the reputation of the church in much of the world at that time. The Greek philosopher Lucian (ca. 120-200) observed the care of believers for one another and said, “It is incredible to see the fervor with which the people of that religion help each other in their wants. They spare nothing. Their first legislator [Jesus] has put it into their heads that they are brethren.” Indeed He has.

Loving each other was one of the final words of admonition from Jesus to the disciples ([Jn. 13:34-35](#)).

As we think about the ministry of Grace Bible Church and where we are heading in 2022 (and beyond), we cannot do better than to be resolute to affirm our commitment to loving care of one another.

In God's grace, our reputation in this community is that we are a loving body of believers. And that is also the reputation within the body — we don't do it perfectly (there are still "a few" of us with the flesh — remaining sin — in our lives), but we do it well. We are attentive, sacrificial, and giving. And as the Lord is granting us growth and expanding our ministry influence, in 2022 we want to be sure to attend to the basics and reaffirm the fundamental priorities we have as a church. Our goal this year is to love and care for one another with excellence, more and more — "excel still more," as Paul says.

Those priorities are articulated for us in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians (4:9-12) —

BELIEVERS IN CHRIST CANNOT LOVE EACH OTHER TOO MUCH.

We can love each other incorrectly, but we cannot practice godly, biblical love too much, or too often. No matter how well we are doing in loving each other, there is always ability (and need) to love more. I often think of something I read from John Piper: "[Being loved] is not essential. Loving, not being loved, is essential." It's a grace gift to be loved by others, but it's not necessary; but it is necessary (it is a biblical command) that we love others in the church body.

Consider **four aspects** of loving care — what is the value, goal, and purpose of caring lovingly for others?

1. A **COMMENDATION** of Loving Care (vv. 9-10a)
2. An **EXHORTATION** for Loving Care (vv. 10b-11)
 - ✓ Love **EVEN MORE** (v. 10b)
 - ✓ Be ambitiously **RESTFUL** (v. 11a)
 - ✓ Keep your **MIND** on your tasks (v. 11b)
 - ✓ Work **HARD** (v. 11c)
3. A **PURPOSE** for Loving Care (v. 12)
4. Loving Care at GBC— what excelling still more looks like

1. A COMMENDATION of Loving Care (vv. 9-10a)

- As we come to this passage, it is helpful to understand the context in which Paul wrote:
 - ✓ The church was persecuted (cf. Acts 17:1-10; 1 Thess. 1:6) so that Paul's time there was limited.
 - ✓ Yet the church *was* faithful and had a reputation for faithfulness (1:5-6, 9).
 - ✓ They were a church that demonstrated transformation by the Word of God (2:13).
 - ✓ Yet the persecution could certainly be an enticement for individuals to think of themselves ahead of the community, and the short time Paul spent with them meant that he undoubtedly was unable to build into them spiritually all he desired to do. So he was concerned for them (3:4-5).
 - ✓ Add to that the reality that Thessalonica was a worldly place (2 Tim. 4:10), there were undoubtedly strong temptations and enticements to live for self and not for others.
 - ✓ While the report was good (3:6-7), this letter was a reminder of the priorities of their care for one another by loving each other — 4:1-2).
- After an application of loving each other by maintaining sexually pure relationships (4:3-8), Paul returns to the theme of love in vv. 9-12. And in vv. 9-10, he commends them for their love:
 - ✓ When Paul reintroduces the topic of love — ***Now as to the love of the brethren...love one another*** (2x) in the verse — it is a reminder of the essential nature of love in the church body.
 - Loving care for each other is not just a NT concept, it is a people of God concept (Lev. 19:18).
 - That truth was reinforced by Christ (Mk. 12:29-32), reminded by Christ at the last supper (Jn. 13:34-35), and a regular theme in the Epistles (Rom. 12:10; 13:8; Gal. 5:13; Eph. 4:2; 1 Pt. 1:22).
 - The biblical concept of love is not just an emotion/desire, but it is a desire that acts. It meets needs and is sacrificial in the care of others: 1 Cor. 13:4-8. (Quote definition of love)
 - ✓ It has been noted that the word ***love of the brethren*** (one word, *philadelphia*) is different from the word ***love one another*** (*agapaō*). It is true that the word *philadelphia* generally referred to familial love (fathers for sons, etc.), and was never used for relationships outside the family in secular writings. The word points to our genuine family relationship with one another when we are adopted into the family of God as mutual siblings.
 - ✓ Some emphasized that this is different from *agapē* love (covenantal, willful). I believe Paul is simply using two different words to emphasize the same truth (as did Jesus, Jn. 21:15-17).
 - ✓ His point is simply that love in the body is fundamental to who we are as believers. If we are believers in Christ, we will love each other; we cannot continue to be unloving and be believers.

- Paul says there are two reasons no one (including him in this letter) needs to write to them about this:
 - ✓ First, they are **taught by God to love** (v. 9b). That is an unusual word (only time in the NT); Paul gives a hint at it in **v. 8** — they have the HS; and he uses a similar idea in 1 Cor. 2:13. He means that they have been taught by the Spirit and Word of God how to love. They have clear directives.
 - ✓ Secondly, they are doing what they have been taught by God (v. 10a). “They not only have been taught about love, but they actually do love.”
 - There are no limitations on their love — it is **toward all the brethren** (no exceptions). They are universally gracious.
 - They are broad in their love — **all Macedonia** (Thessalonica is in the region of Macedonia); Paul probably means that they have been caring towards the other two main churches in Macedonia, Berea and Philippi. Both those churches were poor and persecuted and the Thessalonians did what they could to help (probably emphasizing their financial care).
- The Thessalonians had learned their lesson of loving well; their reputation was well-established and what they did was what God commanded. You really couldn’t ask for a greater commendation.
- Likewise, we rejoice at how GBC cares for each other, both formally and informally you are caring well. (E.g., one family told me they’d only attended a couple of times, but when mom got sick, meals started showing up from people they’d met. That’s what we do — in many different kinds of ways. We are willing to be inconvenienced to love and care for one another.)
- Thessalonica (and we) were doing well; they also needed an encouragement/exhortation (so do we)...

2. An EXHORTATION for Loving Care (vv. 10b-11)

• Love EVEN MORE (v. 10b)

- ✓ The hard part of the spiritual life is often the need to continue and persist. Doing something once is possible; doing it 500x feels impossible.
- ✓ So Paul says, **we urge you** — it’s an encouragement and an exhortation. In **3:11-12**, Paul expressed a prayer that he (and Silvanus and Timothy) had been praying for persevering love. Now he exhorts them to act on that responsibility (which is a good reminder that along with praying, we also need to take action and obey; don’t just pray and say, “I can’t..”). He urges four actions (note the verbs):
- ✓ The first exhortation is to **excel** —to be prominent, to have an abundance, to abound. The same word is used in relation to love in **3:12**; **Phil. 1:9**; 2 Cor. 8:7.
- ✓ And not only is love to be abundant, but **still more**. It is a reminder that no matter how much or how well we love, there is always room for more — can you imagine a wife saying, “stop loving me — you love me too much?”
- ✓ Now isn’t it interesting that Paul urges a church that is loving well to keep on and persist? Wouldn’t you assume they would continue to love? Why would he do that?

- He exhorts continuing to love because love is essential and always incomplete.
- Sacrificial love is contrary to the flesh and a learned behavior (Tt. 2:4); the tendency is always to move away from love, not towards it — so we need ongoing reminders (1 Jn. 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11-12; Gal. 5:13— and more).

- Be ambitiously RESTFUL (v. 11a)

- ✓ The second thing Paul urges is to **lead a quiet life**. He puts together two ideas that seem contrary (like parking on driveways and driving on parkways): be **ambitious** — pursue zealously **a quiet life**, a restful, quiet, peaceable life.
- ✓ Some have said the sense is, “make it your ambition to have no ambition!”
- ✓ The rest here is the rest that comes after a war is over — there is calm tranquility, non-combative.
- ✓ It is a reminder that in love there is no strife and conflict, but peacemaking and reconciliation, doing all that we can to be in harmony with others in the church body (Rom. 12:18; Rom. 14:17, 19).
- ✓ Again, the flesh is bent towards self-righteousness, defensiveness, and argumentativeness. When we love one another (cf. v. 9), we will pursue reconciliation and peace, not our own rights (5:13).
- ✓ Our objective at GBC is always towards restoring and preserving relationships.

- Keep your MIND on your tasks (v. 11b)

- ✓ The next responsibility of love is to **attend to your own business** — “mind your own business.”
- ✓ But this “self-attention” is different than what is generally meant culturally.
- ✓ Evidently there were some in Thessalonica that were unruly and were involving themselves in the responsibilities of others that was inappropriate (e.g., 2 Thess. 3:11).
- ✓ There is a time to be involved in other’s lives (cf. 5:14), but Paul is referring to those who were unrighteously and selfishly meddling in the lives of others.
- ✓ We all have responsibilities to the Lord in our own circles of influence; we need to give attention to that and not presume to meddle in other’s lives when we haven’t taken care of our responsibilities.

- Work HARD (v. 11c)

- ✓ There are several admonitions in the two Thessalonian letters to working hard; it seems that some Thessalonians had decided one of two things:
 - “Christ is coming soon, so don’t worry about work, just wait for his coming...” Paul says, “we don’t live that way — until He comes, keep working” (5:5-6).
 - “The church is responsible to love me by taking care of my needs, so I don’t need to work” — which is what seems to be what is in view here (cf. also 2 Thess. 3:10-12).
- ✓ Paul’s correction: there is nothing wrong with manual labor (**work with your hands**). When we work hard, we love others by not presuming on them to take care of us. Work is good and a gift from God — work existed before the Fall (Gen. 1:28) and will exist after redemption (Rev. 22:3).

- ✓ This call to ***work with your hands*** is not just a good idea — it's a ***command*** (just like the command to love one another). So put it together this way:
 - It is the joy of the church to care for those who have (genuine) need.
 - It is the joy of the individual to work faithfully and hard so he is not dependent on the church.
 - We love by giving generously; and we love by working hard so we don't need care (12b). Why?

3. A PURPOSE for Loving Care (v. 12)

- The reason Paul gives these admonitions about love is because of our testimony to the world. How we care for each other has always been a testimony to the world (cf. Jn. 13:34-35).
- Paul reminds: ***so that*** (purpose statement) ***you will behave properly*** (i.e., respectfully, decently) with ***outsiders*** (anyone outside the Christian community).
- Loving care for others and hard work are powerful testimonies to the world about the transforming power of the gospel.
 - ✓ When we take advantage of the generous love of others, we damage the gospel testimony.
 - ✓ When we fail to be generously loving toward others, we damage the gospel testimony.
 - ✓ We need to be attentive to love others, recognizing that our acts of love about far more than just the particular need of the moment; our acts of love are about creating a culture of care and concern in the church that serves as an enticement to unbelievers to trust in Christ — “see how they love one another.”

4. Loving Care at GBC— what excelling still more looks like

- We have been and are loving well. Let's keep excelling at loving each other. What will that look like?
- ***Be intentional in involving yourselves spiritually in the lives of others:***
 - ✓ Connect to a home group (~70% of you are connected!) — all of us need relationships where we can give and receive expressions of loving care.
 - ✓ When in gatherings, look for the lonely and isolated; you will find other times to talk to your friends — look for those who are not yet your friends first, and engage with them.
 - ✓ Speak words of encouragement and exhortation (Rom. 15:14). Write a note, make a call...
 - ✓ Find someone to disciple (or be disciplined and then find someone).
 - ✓ Pray.
 - Pray for individuals — when someone expresses a need, pray immediately.
 - Pray for ministries and the participants and leaders (missionaries, counselors, deacons, SS and AWANA teachers, secretaries, musicians, elders, safety team,...)
 - Pray for the progress of the gospel — for your own gospel opportunities and others.

- ✓ When you sin against others, confess quickly and fully.
- ✓ When you are sinned against by others, be ready to forgive quickly and fully.
- ***Be intentional in involving yourselves physically in the lives of others:***
 - ✓ Who is ill and needs a meal or an errand or a task that is beyond them?
 - ✓ Does someone need a job? Can you hire someone? Or provide a job lead or a reference?
 - ✓ Does someone need a bill paid?
 - ✓ Does someone need a ride?
 - ✓ Can you help with physical building needs of an individual or at church (repairs, maintenance, etc.)?
 - ✓ Instead of saying, “let me know if there is anything I can do,” ask if you can do particular things, “can I bring soup? Pick up a prescription?...” Let them know you are thinking about their circumstance.
- ***Be generous and involved in meeting ministry needs:***
 - ✓ Home group hosts and leaders
 - ✓ Door greeters and safety; welcome center greeters
 - ✓ Hospitality
 - ✓ Audio and video tech support
 - ✓ Tear down and set up for Sunday
 - ✓ Wednesday meal serving and clean up
 - ✓ AWANA, SS, and Children’s Church teachers or support (listeners)
 - ✓ Nursery workers
 - ✓ Be trained to counsel (you are at one of the best churches in the country for that training)
 - ✓ Be trained to disciple — new believers (and old) need training in how to grow with Christ
 - ✓

CONCLUSION: **“Believers in Christ cannot love each other too much.”**

One of my favorite commentators wrote about this passage, “Genuine Christian love...is the one thing in the Christian life which cannot be carried to excess.” [Hiebert] Amen.

We are loving well. We care well for one another. *Let us excel still more.*

BENEDICTION: **1 Thessalonians 5:23-24**