

## **Gospel Shaped Church (10) – Abounding in Love, Blameless in Holiness.**

*Reading: 1 Thessalonians 3:11-4:12*

Paul & his co-workers have been praying for these believers' night & day. Their desire is to be with them again to supply what is lacking in their faith, likely what is referred to in the remainder of this letter. One of Paul's prayers is that God will remove the obstacles that Satan is using to block his path to them. This reminds us that our greatest weapon against the enemy is prayer; even when there is nothing we can humanly do to change circumstances we can still pray. Paul couldn't be with these young believers but he could pray for them & write to them. In his prayer & the instruction which follows in 4:1-12 there are two main ideas. Notice that his prayer in verses 11-13 is echoes through the instruction which follows. The ideas of living lives of love & holiness in view the return of Jesus. This is in fact a good summary of what we are called to as Christian's. Francis Schaeffer writes this in his book *The Mark of the Christian*;

*“The Christian really has a double task. He has to practice both God's holiness & God's love. The Christian is to exhibit that God exists as the infinite-personal God; & then he is to exhibit simultaneously God's character of holiness & love. Not his holiness without his love: that is only harshness. Not his love without his holiness: that is only compromise. Anything that an individual Christian or Christian group does that fails to show the simultaneous balance of the holiness of God & the love of God presents to a watching world not a demonstration of the God who exists but a caricature of the God who exists.”*

Challenging words, which well sum up the emphasis in the verses we read. The bottom line is our life & our fellowship might be like a window to Christian faith for someone. What do they see when they look at church, or Christian faith, through our lives? Do they see something of the love & holiness of God? Do they see holiness or immorality, do they see grace or self-righteousness, do they feel welcome or freaked out, do they see a growing consistency between what we believe and how we behave or do they see hypocrisy? Do they see the Gospel working? Do they see evidence of the reality that we are the Lord's holy people?

Paul often includes prayers in his letters, prayers which summarise what he & his co-workers have been praying for the churches (Eph 1:15-19, 3:21; Phil 1:9-11; Col 1:9-1). The emphasis of Paul's prayers is that God's holy people would know God, understand who they are & what they have in light of what he has done for them in Christ & live lives worthy of the Lord & please him in every way. Here Paul's oldest such prayer is that these very young believers would grow in loving one another & all & that they would be blameless in holiness in light of God & the return of Christ. I would also point out that what Paul prays here reflects somewhat the heart of Jesus in his prayer in John 17.

What are we praying for ourselves & other believers? Why do we pray what we pray? Is the same emphasis in our prayers that is in these prayers recorded in the New Testament or do our prayers reflect more what John calls **“the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes & the pride of life.”** Do our prayers reflect

that we are living for this world or the kingdom of heaven? John said; **“The world & its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.”** And here in 1 Thessalonians Paul is going to go on & tell us plainly what God’s will is, God’s will for every Christian. That is next week’s message. But now let’s look at Paul’s prayer for these young believers.

## 1. Overflowing in Love

Paul prays; **“May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.”** We have looked quite a lot in recent months at our call to love one another – John 13:24-35; **“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another”** – & how that love is defined in 1 Corinthians 13 is such a challenge. This is the love Paul desires to see increasing for each other & overflowing to all. It’s not that we only love each other; but that if we don’t love each other the world will not know we are his. And the truth is when there is increasing love for each other it will very naturally overflow into the lives of others. We learn Christ-like love in Christ-centred fellowship & it is only lack of Christ-like love that would keep us away from Christ-centred fellowship. Christian fellowship is the garden in which Christ-like love is meant to flourish & be seen by the world. It’s as we let our roots go down deep into his love that the increase comes. Let us pray for an increase of love among us, a harvest of love for one another that will overflow to all.

We know this young church was doing quite well in this area by Paul’s words in 4:9-10 when he writes; **“Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all God’s family in throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more.”** Love for one another, love for all Christians in the area, love for everyone. These are the ideas surfacing in Paul’s prayer & instruction & we will come back to this.

## 2. Blameless in Holiness

Secondly Paul prays for these young believers; **“May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with his holy ones.”** Again Paul’s prayer introduces themes he will return to in the instruction that follows. His prayer here serves as a transition in the letter, a transition to telling these young believers how to live in light of their reception of the gospel. The idea in this second part of his prayer is holiness. Christians are called to be holy. In 4:2 Paul underlines that the instruction to be sanctified, the call to be holy comes by the authority of the Lord Jesus. In verse 3 he says it is God’s will for us. Just as Paul has stressed the gospel came not from himself but God, so he now stresses the instruction to be holy comes not from him but Christ. The instruction which follows this prayer is not telling us how to become a Christian, we have

already seen welcoming the gospel as God's word does that. No it will teach us how we are to live now we are Christians – that we are called to live a holy life (4.7).

The idea of holiness like love is a theme which runs through the whole Bible. Holy means to be set apart. God is set part in a very unique way in that there is no one like him, no one compares to him in anyway. He alone is innately holy – holy, holy, holy! In the Bible because God is holy he also sets other things & people aside as holy. These things & people & not innately holy like God rather they are holy because the holy God has set them apart for a special purpose. So for example in the OT we see God setting Israel apart as holy & therefore Israel was responsible to be holy. Israel's responsibility to be holy came from their being set apart as holy. Of course they failed in their responsibility.

God then sent Jesus to both accomplish & personify holiness. And because Jesus is the holy one of God, through his redeeming work he is able to make people holy. So when it comes to us as Christians we are set apart as holy. We have been made holy in Christ & because of this we have been given the responsibility to be holy & we have been given the Holy Spirit to enable us to be who we are – the Lord's holy people. Paul's prayer for & instruction to these young believers & the instruction Paul gives is simply application of God's moral law to the Christian life which we will look at in more detail next week. As Christians we are called to holiness as it is defined in God's moral law & as it is seen most clearly in Christ. We are called to live our lives before God – in view of his holiness & love - & in light of the coming of Jesus. We are called saints, holy ones, they Lord's holy people.

I hesitate in questioning what some define these days as '*hyper grace teaching*' because I personally don't believe we can over-emphasise God's grace – we depend on it completely. Yet God's grace can be misunderstood, misrepresented & misinterpreted & other things can be underemphasized & even left out. One thing I believe is in danger of being left out of contemporary Christianity in the Lord's call to holiness. In our eagerness to run from any form of legalism let us ensure that we do not run from our Lord's holy commands for Christian living.

The Bible not only tells us about God's grace it tells us what we have been made by grace & what that looks like for everyday Christian living. Grace makes us a holy people, a people belonging to God, a people set apart for his glory & that means we live unto God – to please him. The New Testament not only emphatically tells us we are saved 100% by grace it also emphatically tells the believer **“be holy for I am holy”**. One cannot honestly read, study & preach through whole books of the New Testament in context & escape the believers call to holy living – there is simply no room for what has been termed theologically as antinomianism. Think about it, is it not obvious that to be anti God's law is to be anti-God. Let us understand deeply as believers that to not be under the law anymore is not the same as being lawless. No a sign of the New Covenant people is; **“I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their**

**minds**" (Heb 10:16; Jer. 31:33). If one's heart then is still rebelling against God's moral law, if one still mistrusts the goodness of it then this is in reality more a sign one is still under law & not under grace. To doubt the goodness of God's Law is to doubt the goodness of God himself which is what led to mankind's rebellion in the first place. The Law was never the bad guy, we were.

The law of God was a burden we could not bear for sure; something we could never measure up to by our own efforts, certainly. Yet now Christ has atoned for our lawbreaking, has met its righteous requirements for us AND ALSO sent his Spirit **"in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met IN us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit"** (Rom 8:4). So yes the Christian is not under law, but is not the moral law of God which reflects his unchanging love, holiness & goodness now written on the new heart of the Christian!?! And this radically effects how Christians live. They now love God's law; they didn't before but now they do! Before they distrusted it, feared it or even hated it but now they love it, trust it as good & delight in it as the law of life not death. Is not this in fact evidence of true conversion; that the new heart given by grace alone beats in total agreement with the Psalmists delight in God's good law so beautifully expressed in Psalm 119!?

How can one have the law of God written on one's heart & at the same time be antinomian – i.e. lawless, against the law? To be anti God's law is to be anti God, think about it. The moral law of God is so wrapped up in our new identity in Christ that it is engraved in our hearts by his life giving Spirit. While the letter of the law was in itself powerless to produce any of its goodness in us, the Spirit powerfully produces holy living by enabling Christians to meet **"the righteous requirements of the law."** This is why over & over again the moral law of God is so clearly held up in the New Testament letters as the pattern for Christian behaviour in relational obedience to Jesus. Not as a prescription of how to become a Christian but as a description of how Christians as a holy people *must* live. Paul's prayer & instruction is example of this & this is why he can write such challenging instructions to very new believers, because even very new believers have new hearts shaped by the good & holy commandments of a good & holy God.

What we deeply need to understand is that both legalism & antinomianism are a failure to understand our true identity as believers. The legalist sees themselves as a slave of God rather than a child of God while the antinomian forgets they have been set apart as holy & *both of them doubt the goodness of God's commands – they just deal with their doubt differently.*