

Brotherly Love

Leviticus 19:9–18, 1 Thessalonians 4:9–12

Why is there so much war, hatred and cruelty in the world? Sometimes we are tempted to throw up our hands in frustration when we hear the news! When will it all end? Isn't there any good news?

Yes, there is good news! It is called the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. The good news is that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. Ultimately, that is the only good news there is, and a lot of people don't want to hear it. You are going to hear the Good News this morning, and in receiving it you are greatly blessed. But in this world there is tribulation, suspicion, envy. I have three points this morning: (1) a duty, (2) a gift, and (3) a responsibility. First,

1. A duty

Our text begins: “But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you.” Just ten verses back the apostle Paul had written: “May the Lord make you increase and abound in *love* to one another and to all.” In the last chapter, the word he used for love is ἀγάπη. This is the word that denotes the self-giving love that God has to a world of lost sinners. “God so loved . . . that he *gave*.” Look with me back at chapter 3, verse 12, “May the Lord make you increase and abound in love [ἀγάπη] to one another and to all.”

The first and second greatest commandments are to *love God* with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to *love our neighbor* in the same manner as we love ourself. This is the duty of every man, woman and child on the face of the earth. These are the words of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ does not tell us merely to *tolerate* our neighbor but to *love* our neighbor! We are to love our neighbor whether or not he is lovable, whether or not he is a Christian, whether or not he is worthy of our love. If he is our neighbor, we are to love him. Paul prayed, “May the Lord make you increase and abound in love.” We are to abound in love “to one another”—that is, to our fellow Christians, members of the body of Christ. We are also to abound in love to all people. Though the word “people” is not used in the New King James Version, it is evident from the grammar. As I mentioned in an earlier sermon, the word for “all” is masculine. That is an important clue to understanding the passage. The word is not feminine or neuter. If it were feminine it would mean something like “increase and abound in love to all *women*.” But why would God require us to have a selfless, self-sacrificial love for women and not men? Again, if the word were neuter, it would mean “increase and abound in love to all *things*.” Now, if God has blessed you with things, he calls you to be a good steward over them. You should take care of them; you should use them for his glory. But that is not what Paul is talking about in this context. What he actually said was that we are to increase and abound in love for all *people*. In the language

of the Bible, masculine expressions such as this one included *all* people, male and female.

So we are—all of us—to increase and abound in love for all *people*. Here is God's revealed will for every member of the human race. The God of heaven who made us and created us and gave us instructions for the proper functioning of society wills that all human beings love one another and treat one another with respect and esteem. How far the human race has fallen from God's ideal! Instead of love, respect and esteem, we have war, hatred and cruelty. We have people trying to take advantage of other people, people committing crimes against other people. But God's ideal is that we *love* one another. Christians ought to be setting the example for the world. Christians should love their fellow Christians and love all people. Christian love begins with the household of God and flows from there to the whole world. If the church really grasped this idea and put it into practice, it would revolutionize the world.

What are some of the ways we can love other people? Our Old Testament Scripture, a key biblical text regarding loving our neighbor, shows us how. God is speaking. He says, "I the LORD your God am holy . . . I am the LORD your God." This is not man's opinion, this is the God of heaven speaking! He says, "You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another. And you shall not swear by My name falsely, nor shall you profane the name of your God: I am the LORD. You shall not cheat your neighbor." Clearly, God is teaching his people what it means to love our neighbor. The climax and summary of our duty is expressed in the words "you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD." Here is the God of heaven, the Creator, the Judge of all, declaring his will. He reminds us of his sovereignty and his right to make such demands: "I am the LORD." The God of heaven requires us all to love our neighbor as we love ourselves—that is, unselfishly. "No one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it" (Eph. 5:29). When we are threatened, the "fight or flight" mechanism kicks in. We realize that we are in danger, so we fight tooth and nail to preserve our life. Our Old Testament text shows us that we are not to love our neighbor in some vague, undefinable way. We are not just to have warm feelings in our heart, loving the human race but harboring ill will toward individual people. We are to love our neighbor in a concrete, measurable manner. Here are some of the things our text teaches: We love our neighbor by promoting his material wellbeing, by speaking truthfully to him, by keeping our promises to him, by not cheating or robbing him, by keeping our financial obligations to him, by not taking advantage of him, by giving a physically or mentally handicapped neighbor special consideration, by having a charitable spirit toward our neighbor, by not hating him in our heart, by rebuking him when he is wrong, by not taking vengeance or holding a grudge against him but by loving him as we love ourselves.

We are to have an especial love for “the poor and stranger”—people we might not ordinarily want to associate with or choose as our friends. Folk wisdom teaches that “birds of a feather flock together.” We are most comfortable being around people who are a lot like we are—people having the same interests, who are of the same socio-economic class, who have similar political views, who subscribe to our worldview. This is the remarkable thing about the church. In the church we are closely related to all those who sincerely love the Christ of Scripture and love to worship the true God. Can there be sweeter fellowship than that? Jesus eloquently expressed this spiritual bond when he said, “Whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my *brother*, and *sister*, and *mother*.” Here is the language of family. At the final day the church will be made up of men, women and children from every kingdom, tribe, tongue and nation, gathering together like family, all worshipping Christ! That will be a wonderful day!

In our 1 Thessalonians text Paul uses two different words for love. When he says, “May the Lord make you increase and abound in *love* to one another and to all” (3:12), he uses the word ἀγάπη. This is the self-giving love demonstrated by God himself. God shows his love to a world of lost sinners. “God so loved the world that he *gave*.” In our present text he uses the word φιλαδελφία, brotherly love.

All of us need love. As a popular song says, “What the world needs now is love, sweet love.” The love of a fellow human can be very comforting and satisfying. It is downright ecstatic know that another human loves us! But that other human can die or be taken away from us. Human love is not permanent, but the love *of God* is permanent. God has loved us with an everlasting love. His love does not end with death, it *transcends* death. For the Christian, when we die here on earth, we are instantly transported into the very presence of our Redeemer and will behold his face in heaven—life that never ends. It is our Savior who guarantees this. He says, “I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.”¹ Jesus is the way, the truth and the *life*. The life that he gives is “eternal life.” It can never be taken away from us.

In chapter 3 Paul uses the word ἀγάπη, God’s self-giving love. But here in chapter 4, verse 9 he uses a different word, the word φιλαδελφία. This is the word after which the city of Philadelphia is named. Φιλαδελφία (brotherly love) is derived from φίλος (*beloved, dear*) and ἀδελφός (*brother*). Ἡ φιλαδελφία μενέτω (“let brotherly love continue”)—a worthy motto for any city.

Sadly, Philadelphia is inhabited by sinners, as is every city in the world. Philadelphia is known as the “city of brotherly love,” but earlier this year on a SEPTA elevated train platform—I’ve ridden it many times—an argument arose

¹ John 10:28

over a cigarette lighter—something worth perhaps a few dollars. A large man pushed a smaller man against a pillar, yelling, “Give me back my lighter!” The smaller man, who was homeless, struck his opponent in the face twice, sending him falling onto the tracks. Screams and cries were heard from the horrified crowd waiting on the platform as a speeding train crushed the man seconds later, killing him instantly. There was no brotherly love that day!²

It’s easy to take sides in a dispute, but the Bible shows that all of us have the capacity for violence by virtue of the fall. James writes, “What causes quarrels and . . . fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?”³ According to the Bible, whoever hates his brother is a *murderer*—and by that standard we all deserve eternal death. The only way we can be saved is by putting our faith and trust in Jesus Christ. Through double imputation our sins were laid upon him, and his perfect righteousness is credited to us as a free gift. That is the *gospel*; the only way to heaven. None of us deserve it. It can only be received as a free gift.

Loving our neighbor is a *duty*—a universal duty binding upon every man, woman and child. No one can escape that duty. At the final day it will be determined: did you and I truly love our neighbor in the manner that God requires? We are to love God with a *perfect* love—with all our heart, all our soul, all our strength and all our mind. Such love will be reflected in a sincere desire to worship God. We will say with the Psalmist, “I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the LORD.” The Lord’s day, when we gather with God’s people, will become the highlight of our week. It will be what we look forward to all week long. To be able to rest from our regular six-day labors, to gather with God’s people and sing his praises, to sit at the feet of Jesus and hear his Word proclaimed, to come to the Lord’s table, knowing that the risen Christ girds a towel around himself and serves us from his heavenly table. Such love!

But along with loving God, our wise heavenly Father requires us to love our neighbor as well. Here in our text this morning it is captured in the term *φιλαδελφία*—brotherly love. If we love God but do not love our neighbor, then we fall short, we do not measure up to God’s requirement. But if we love our neighbor, and do not love God, then we fall short as well. God’s standard is absolute perfection: we must love God and our neighbor perfectly in order to enter heaven. “But concerning brotherly love (*φιλαδελφία*) you have no need that I should write to you.” Our second point is

2. A gift

² <https://www.breitbart.com/crime/2024/01/05/police-homeless-man-knocked-philadelphia-train-passenger-to-his-death/> accessed 1-5-24

³ Jas. 4:1 ESV

Verse 9 says in full, “But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are *taught by God* to love one another.” What is the import of the words “taught by God”? What Paul is saying is that the reason the Thessalonian Christians are practicing brotherly love is because they are “taught by God.” In the Bible it is a single word meaning *God-taught*. It was apparently coined by the apostle Paul, but its meaning is perfectly clear. His point is that only a person who is born again can truly love his neighbor. The unregenerate person cannot love his neighbor unselfishly. It is impossible. The unregenerate person might love his neighbor out of selfish motives, either to gain an advantage for himself or to be well thought-of. But he cannot love any other person in the way that Christ loved us, thinking not of his own needs but only of the needs of the other person.

The phrase “taught by God” (a slightly different expression in the original Greek) appears in one other place. The person who uses it is our Lord himself. John 6:44–45 Jesus said, “It is written in the prophets, ‘and they shall all be *taught by God*.’ Therefore everyone who has heard and *learned* from the Father comes to Me.” There are two kinds of people in the world: those who have been taught by God, and those who have not been taught by God; those whose hearts have been transformed by the Holy Spirit of God, and those whose hearts have not been transformed by the Holy Spirit of God. The one group is saved, the other group is lost. The one group is on its way to heaven, the other group is on its way to hell. The one group is followers of Christ, the other group is not followers of Christ. So what is the meaning of this phrase, “taught by God”? When Jesus says, “It is written in the prophets, ‘and they shall all be *taught by God*,’ he refers to Isaiah 54:13, which says, “All your children shall be *taught by the LORD*, and great shall be the peace of your children.” Isn’t that a beautiful promise? “All your children shall be taught by the LORD, and great shall be the peace of your children.” The prophet Isaiah looks forward in history to the coming of the Messiah, when there would be a large turning to Christ—such as on the day of Pentecost, when 3,000 souls were brought to Christ when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the church. Taught by the Lord—born again by the Spirit—these new believers were justified by faith and began to experience peace of conscience and joy in the Holy Spirit. This is the meaning of the phrase “taught by God.” When the apostle says, “you yourselves are *taught by God* to love one another,” he is teaching that those who are not taught by God *cannot* love one another—at least, not in the manner that God requires.

The apostle Peter is in perfect agreement. In his first epistle he uses both words for love, and ties it in with being born again. In 1 Peter 1:22–23 he writes, “Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren (φιλαδελφία), love (ἀγαπάω) one another fervently with a pure

heart, *having been born again*, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever.” Peter is clearly teaching that the person who loves his Christian brothers and sisters in obedience to the truth has been “born again.” He gives evidence of the genuineness of his new birth by his sincere love of the brethren. Taught by the Holy Spirit, he is supernaturally enabled to love even the unlovely, even people he might have had difficulty loving in the past. This is a revolutionary thought—something that could change the whole atmosphere of the world from people who *compete* with each other to people who *help* one another.

The essence of the moral law is love for God and love for our neighbor. If you are born again, then you will gladly become a worshiper of God. In like manner, if you are born again, then you will gladly and sincerely love your Christian brothers and sisters. Does this love characterize you? Have you been supernaturally enabled to love not only fellow Christians in your particular people group, but also those who are *not* in your people group?

We began this message with the question, “Why is there so much war, hatred and cruelty in the world?” It is because of the fall. Because of the fall, “death passed upon all men.”⁴ When Adam sinned, he brought guilt and condemnation on the whole human race. All human beings save One, the Lord Jesus Christ, sinned in our forefather Adam and fell with him. Jesus, who had a human mother but did not have a biological father, did not inherit original sin. He is fully man, having obtained his humanity from his mother, Mary, and as man was fully qualified to die in the place of men when he purchased our salvation on the cross of Calvary. But Jesus did not inherit original sin. He was not predisposed to sin. He is the perfect one, the one in whom the Father is well pleased. By his atonement, those who look to him in true faith are forgiven and justified, and enabled to love their neighbor.

Are you born again? Do you believe in Jesus Christ, to the salvation of your soul? Do you love God? Do you love your fellow man—however imperfectly? Maybe you do not love other people as you should, but Paul is encouraging us to grow in this area, “to increase and abound in love”—to “increase more and more.” Let us who love the Lord Jesus Christ ever keep doing this more and more!

Thirdly, we have

3. A responsibility

Paul urges the saints: “that you increase more and more; that you also aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you, that you may walk properly toward those who are outside.”

We have received the new birth as a free gift, but that does not mean that we rest on past accomplishments and do not advance in godliness.

⁴ Rom. 5:12

Each of us has a responsibility to “work with our own hands” so that we “may lack nothing”; that is, so that we may provide for our own needs and have the ability to help others. Here, the apostle alludes to our fourth-commandment duty, “six days shalt thou labor.” God wants all able-bodied people to work, to use our hands to supply the things that we need to live. Our loving God has so constituted the world that we are able to provide for all our daily needs with six days of labor. Paul will have a lot more to say about this subject in these two epistles. But for the moment let me say that God does not want us to be lazy but to use our minds and bodies to provide for our human needs. God is able to do this in a supernatural manner as he did for Israel in the wilderness, providing manna and quail. But once the people of God were safely in the land of Canaan, the manna and quail ceased. God expected his people to sow and reap and produce their own food. So it is for us as well. Each of us must use his gifts and abilities in the service of our own families and in the service of our fellow man. God is glorified as his people labor and serve one another in love. Even our Lord Jesus Christ labored as a carpenter before he became an itinerant teacher. Let us, as his servants, not be slothful, but use our gifts for his glory. May God be glorified as we serve one another in love. Amen.