

Pastor Don Nelson

Sermon: October 3, 2010
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

**“HOPE FOR LOVE” (Part 1)
First Thessalonians 3:11-13**

You expected an ordinary Passover feast, but this meal is different, more momentous. It is the Last Supper.

You have often enjoyed funny banter and casual conversation with the Master, but not tonight. In a few hours he will die on the cross, and time is of the essence.

- With what truth, power and beauty does Jesus leave you? **“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”** – what? – **“love one another.”** (John 13:34-35)

It sounds almost too simple. Yet Christ-like love for one’s brothers and sisters in the Church is the quintessential hallmark, the defining characteristic, the irrefutable sign of actual discipleship.

If we love each other the world will know we are Jesus People. That does not mean they will join us; but they will believe that our commitment to Christ is genuine.

If we do not love each other, they will scorn us as self-deluded fools or worse, malicious hypocrites. Having been repelled by God’s people, they will be less inclined to trust God’s Gospel and receive God’s salvation.

Love is not the *only* element in discipleship.

However, it is a precondition of all the others.

□ In 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13 Paul writes:

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come

to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. 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 all his holy ones.

Let’s examine this through the lens of *What*, *Who*, and *How*.

- Verse 12: **“May the Lord make your love increase and overflow.”** Paul uses the word *αγαπε* [*agape*], as does Jesus in John 13. This is the “What.”

📖 *Αγαπε* love is a conscious decision to act in goodwill for the well-being of others. It is based, not on the qualities or actions of the receiver, but on the giver’s commitment. It empowers us to: {Mt 5:44} **“love [our] enemies and pray for”** our persecutors; interact {Col 3:12-13} **“with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. [Bearing] with... and [forgiving] each other”**; {Mt 25:31-46} serve the needy; and even to {Mt 28:19} **“make disciples of all nations.”** *Αγαπε* frequently ignites warm feelings but it begins with, and is defined by, action.

Properly exercised, there is a place in our lives for all kinds of love; yet *αγαπε* is the priority. It has the power to strengthen, purify, guide, and restrain all the other loves. It is part and parcel of Christian mission and ministry.

■ V 12: **“May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else.”**

“Who” are the rightful objects of our love?

Everyone. Our obligation to love starts with **“each other”** (fellow citizens in the kingdom of God), but it fully includes all who live outside his realm and even campaign against it (**“everyone else”**).

☞ We are tempted to hoard love as a nonrenewable resource that is about to run out. Not God. {1 Jn 3:1} **“See what great love the Father has lavished on us!”**

☞ We prefer to operate within clearly marked limits beyond which *αγαπε* is optional. Yet our Father in heaven {Mt 5:45} **“causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”**

☞ We are apt to soften the command to *“Love those who deserve it, who respond favorably, who believe / worship / live / vote the right way.”* Yet {Ro 5:8; 8:7-8} **“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners,” “hostile to God”** and unable to please him, **“Christ died for us.”**

Some say unconditional love is incompatible with firm moral standards (as if we cannot say “Stop!” or “Please, don’t!” to the ones we love). Thus they interpret the call to unrestricted *αγαπε* as lawlessness.

Nothing could be further from the truth! As God breaks our chains, he opens the eyes of our heart to see that what we once thought was freedom – greed, lust, uncovenanted sex, drunkenness, wrath, pride, and so on – is actually body-destroying, mind-warping, soul-killing

bondage of the worst kind. It is precisely because we love people that we despise their sin.

✠ However, *αγαπε* requires us to make a sharp distinction between sinner and sin, without exception. And it compels us to {Eph 4:15} “[speak] **the truth in love**”: humbly, gently, mercifully, and hopefully.

But can we really love **“Each other and... everyone else”**? Or is it wishful thinking?

☑ {1 Co 13:4-8a} I mean, **“Love is patient”**; but I sometimes give up on people. It **“is kind”** – still, I often settle for being “nice.” Love **“does not envy, ...does not boast,...is not proud”**; yet at times I am more concerned with my image than my character. Love **“is” – I not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs”**; sometimes, I do the right thing for the wrong reason (that is **“self-seeking”**). I could go on, but you get the picture.

Can our love **“increase and overflow”**? I am not implying that you are just like me. There are people who are better at this than I am!

Even so, apart from Jesus I do not know anyone whose love is perfect. Is there real hope for greater love?

■ Back to v 12: **“May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else.”** This gets at the “How” of *αγαπε*.

As Christ Followers our bodies are **“temples of the Holy Spirit”** (First Corinthians 6:19), hence **“it is God who works in [us] to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose”** (Philippians 2:13).

① He works to change our spiritual DNA, conforming us {Ro 8:29} **“to the image of his Son,”** so we increasingly resemble Jesus in thought, word, and deed. It follows that {2 Co 5:14-15} **“Christ’s love compels us”** to share *αγαπε* **“because he died... that [we] should no longer live for [ourselves] but for him.”**

② He works to kindle our desire to love others by loving us. First John 4 {4:7, 19} **“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. We love because he first loved us.”** The Father’s love makes us want love others – and isn’t that half the battle?

③ He works to provides opportunities for love. Every human interaction is a divine appointment. Each contact is an occasion to practice *αγαπε*. **“Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity”** (Ephesians 5:15-17).

Can our love **“increase and overflow”**?

Absolutely! For **“It is God...works in [us] to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.”**

I am living proof. My love is imperfect. Yet it is growing purer and stronger, for the likeness of Jesus is coming into sharper focus in me as He loves others through me.

So, can we simply kick back, relax, and let the Spirit do all the heavy lifting? By no means!

--> *Αγαπε* is an imperative. Here’s one text out of dozens and dozens: **“Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law”** (Romans 13:8).

But what can we do? Here are some ideas from First Thessalonians. This is the “How.”

☼ We can pray. Paul prays for and about the Thessalonians at four places in this letter (1:2, 3:10, 5:23, and today’s text, 3:11-13). Our thanksgivings and intercessions do not always change others; they do change us. God uses them to transform our attitudes and thoughts toward the ones for whom we pray.

☼ We can model authenticity. In 2:5-10 we learn that Paul **“never used flattery,”** did not pretend to be something he was not, was not greedy, was kind, and tried not to be a burden. Who we are determines what we do. Deeds of *αγαπε* can only spring out of a heart of *αγαπε*.

☼ We can share our lives. In 2:8 Paul says: **“we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.”** We can do this by worshipping, studying, serving, rejoicing, mourning, and living life together. Mutual knowledge is crucial. Without it love is unfocused, and despite our best intentions can sometimes be hurtful.

☼ And we can encourage: In 2:11-12 Paul describes how he encouraged, comforted, and urged his readers **“to live lives worthy of God.”** Sometimes we are ignorant of our sin, and the best thing a brother or sister can do is humbly, gently point it out to us; more often we are only too aware. In that case we need help from one who knows about falling down and getting up again, who can assure us that it is worth the

struggle. We also need them to act as a mirror, reflecting back the glimpses of Jesus they see in us.

There is much more we can do. But praying, modeling authenticity, sharing our lives, and encouraging others is a great start.

Can our love “**increase and overflow**”?

By the grace of God, the answer is a resounding “Yes!” **“It is God who works in [us] to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.”**

Yet he requires our intentional cooperation.

→ The stakes are high. Fail to love, and the rest of our discipleship is pointless. If we “**do not have love**, [we are] **nothing**” and “**gain nothing**” – it is all for naught (First Corinthians 13:2-3).

→ But if we choose αγαπε, God will redeem even our failures. As First Peter 4:8 urges: “**love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.**”

“May the Lord make [our] love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else.”