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Sermon: October 17, 2010
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“HOPE FOR LOVE” (Part 2)
First Thessalonians 4:1-12

☑ Speaking through a character in her novel Emma, Jane Austen observed that **“Surprises are foolish things. The pleasure is not enhanced, and the inconvenience is often considerable.”**

● I am guessing that she did not appreciate the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25 {25:31-46}. It features two huge surprises – one of which is the least pleasurable, most inconvenient shock imaginable.

“When [the Messiah] comes in his glory” he will gather all the people before his throne and separate them.

“The King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom.’” He will praise them for their acts of love to him, but they will ask: **“Lord, when did we”** do all these things? The King will answer, **“When you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you were doing it to me!”** That is the **first shock**.

“Then the King will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the Devil and his demons!’” He will condemn them for failing to love him, but they will reply: **“Lord, when did we ever see you [in need], and did not help you?”** The King will reply, **“When you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me.”** This is the **2nd, shock**. **“The**

pleasure is not enhanced, and the inconvenience is,” (to put it mildly) **“considerable.”**

→ *Ἀγαπε* love is imperative. {Mt 22:37-40} **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”**

☉ These two decrees are so interconnected they virtually function as one, especially in regard to church relationships. First John 4:20-21 warns, **“If we do not love a fellow believer, whom we have seen, we cannot love God, whom we have not seen. ... Those who love God must also love one another.”** Love for others (above all our spiritual family) is a litmus test of our love for God.

Going back to the parable, I believe I will hear the King say, **“Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom.”** Then again, those who are cursed expect the same. The question is: *How can we have assurance that we are loving God by loving others?*

☉ Here’s one potential solution: Taking the parable in isolation, we could conclude that our hands-on care for the hungry, thirsty, lonely, naked, sick and imprisoned is all the confirmation we need. That is a practical, clear-cut measure, is it not? And if our self-evaluation uncovers a shortfall, how easy it is to pencil more service hours and charitable giving into our calendar! (Thank you, Matthew 25!)

☹ The problem is, that solution is incomplete, for the parable must not be read in isolation. There are many other Scriptures about love, among them First Corinthians 13:3: **“If I give all I possess to the poor ...but do not have love, I gain nothing.”** It is possible to do deeds of *αγαπε* for the wrong reasons – in which case, false motives negate the deed.

☪ That is consistent with what Christ Jesus taught in his Sermon on the Mount: {Mt 5:21-22; 27-28} **“it was said... ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment”**; and **“it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart”** – the point being that God assigns as much value to attitude and intent as to action.

☑ In this respect, *αγαπε* love is like a stool with three legs: right mind-set, right goals, and right deeds. What happens if you remove one of the legs? The whole thing collapses.

Where does this leave us? How can we know whether we are loving God by loving others?

☐ Please turn to First Thessalonians 4:1-12.

☐ In verses 1-2 Paul establishes his basic agenda: **“As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.”**

☺ Paul’s goal is for them to please God. If they do, they will hear the King say, **“Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom.”** (He doesn’t say that; but the implication is obvious when you read his words alongside Matthew 25.)

In the rest of the passage the apostle spells out two ways in which we can please God.

☐ 1st, in verses 3-8 he calls us to sexual holiness. Among other things, he says: **“It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable.”**

✠ Specifically, {E.C.C. Annual Meeting, 1996} **“The one appropriate place for sexual”** interactions is in **“marriage between one woman and one man”** **“Heterosexual marriage, faithfulness within marriage, abstinence outside of marriage – these constitute the Christian standard.”**

Sexual sin is not unforgivable. **“When we fall short, we are invited to repent, receive the forgiveness of God, and amend our lives.”**

Even so, God commands us to avoid it, in large part because *αγαπε* love demands holiness. As verse 6 says: **“in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister.”**

→ “Wronging” and “taking advantage” go far beyond assault, abuse, and coercion. An encounter might be entirely consensual; but if it violates God’s will, each partner is wronging the other, for *αγαπε* **“love does no harm to its neighbor”** (Ro. 13:10).

Some of the harm inflicted by immorality is obvious: unwanted pregnancies; STDs; broken relationships; and so on. Much of the harm is less noticeable, but equally significant: the loss of self-control; a mind that reduces people to sexual objects; a weakened ability to discern and obey God's will; etc. But the worst damage is delayed: eternal separation from God. (Revelation 21:8: **“the sexually immoral... will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur.”**)

Sexual sin is incompatible with *αγαπε*. It is also enticing and hard to resist. Therefore, sexual purity is an effective barometer of love for others and God.

□ 2nd, in verses 11-12 the apostle calls us to responsibility in the Christian community. Inspired by God's Holy Spirit, he draws a sharp contrast between responsibility on the one hand and meddling and avoidable dependency on the other.

As for meddling, he writes: **“Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business.”** *Αγαπε* requires us to share our hearts and our lives. But there is a fine line between mutual fellowship (which glorifies God and strengthens us), and sticking your nose where it doesn't belong (which dishonors God and undermines the Church).

Why is that? Meddling is either an effort to build or prove the self-importance of the meddler, or to gain or exercise social power, or both. It turns other people into tools for self-advancement.

As for avoidable dependency Paul advises: **“work with your own hands...so that you will not be dependent on anybody.”**

Note the implied, *“If at all possible.”* Widowhood, divorce, disability, the lack of marketable skills, and a slow economy can make independence difficult. *Αγαπε* love obligates God's people to generously help the truly needy.

However, Paul's readers in 1 Th 4 (and again in 2 Th 3) have opportunities to work, but some are not. Instead, they are selfishly, greedily depending on the Church to support them.

Meddling and avoidable dependency are incompatible with *αγαπε*. They expose self-centeredness and greed. Therefore, personal responsibility is an effective barometer of love for others and God.

■ Now, let's go back to verses 9-10: **“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 the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, dear friends, to do so more and more.”**

Strategically sandwiched between verses 3-8 and 11-12, this section spotlights the link between sexual holiness, personal responsibility, and love:

Sexual immorality is incompatible with *αγαπε*. Those who are caught up in it must break free, and those who are not must seek greater self-control and sanctification.

Meddling and avoidable dependency are incompatible with *αγαπε*. Those who are involved in it

must break free, and those who are not must seek greater fellowship and responsibility.

These are not the only gauges of our love for God and others, but they are good ones.

“When [the Messiah] comes in his glory,” will he say to us, **“Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom”?**

The answer depends on our love for God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit revealed in our love for others (especially brothers and sisters in the Church).

This is the Word of the Lord.